The Elder Sister

FRANK SWINNERTON

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THE ELDER SISTER

FRANK SWINNERTON

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by

FRANK SWINNERTON

GROSSET & DUNLAP, Publishers

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THE ELDER SISTER
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THE ELDER SISTER

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PART ONE: VERA

CHAPTER I: THE SISTERS

I

IT was beautiful to see the young moon in a lavender evening sky. The crowds were gathering in Hyde Park, under the arching trees, and strolling or loitering as if time were endless. Those who sat upon the chairs at the side of the path watched the passers, their eyes following, returning, and occasionally glancing aside in wordless comment upon what they had remarked. Upon three friends such eyes rested long, drawn by irresistible magnetism. The friends slowly continued to walk westward along the path, perhaps ignoring, perhaps unconscious of, the interest they created. Vera's head was a little thrown back in the intoxication of movement in such a crowd, under the arching trees and the lavender sky. She walked upon Mortimer's right hand, while Anne was upon his left—all three of them middle-sized and slim, all young, all happy, shabby, and silent. It was a Sunday evening, and Monday's work lay heavy before them all; yet they remembered nothing of Monday. For each of them this press of people in the twilight, and the thin remote moon, the dense masses of hardly-moving fresh green leaves immediately above them, the lighted bandstand, and the slowly crowding noisy walkers upon the same broad pathway as themselves, filled the senses and

controlled the mind. The evening was very warm. It was June, and June's sweetness was in the air, even here in London, giving magic to every feeling and every thought.

Both Anne and Vera were dressed in light, plain cotton frocks which had been washed often and which therefore had lost freshness. Both were dark, but Vera was the darker. Both were slim, and both walked well and freely. It was impossible in this half-light to see the eyes of either, but in feature, although both girls were pale, they were clearly of unusual prettiness. Anne's hat was a broad-brimmed straw, which shaded her brow and veiled her glance. Vera's was a small hat, peaked over the eyes, which smiled inscrutably from under it. Vera had made the hat herself, with characteristic *chic,* and she wore it with a slick cock of impertinence which drew the observation of all the young men. It was not Anne's *chic* which drew as certainly that same observation from the young men (Anne to Vera, and Vera again to Anne), but something in herself which did not fail to please. Vera was one-and-twenty; Anne was twenty-two. Anne was the elder sister by exactly eleven months.

II

Mortimer, between them, was a little older, but not more than five-and-twenty. He was in appearance shabbier than they, but that was because his clothes, although well brushed, at no time received any other attention. His bowler hat, also, was greyed by indifferent exposure to the rain and the sun. He was hardly taller than his companions, and was slightly built. And, just as the girls were pretty, so Mortimer (in their company, at least, and thus distinguished from his fellows) was noticeably good-looking. His brows were well arched,

his nose was straight, his lips full. But what gave his face character was less the moulding of his features, which was clean and delicate, than the light in his grey eyes, which made them appear to change each instant. They were the eyes of a passionate man; and the mouth was the mouth of an impulsive one. It was easy to see that both girls turned to Mortimer with ease and with some understanding, but without fear. Both instinctively knew themselves to be stronger in character than he. But he was mysterious to them, because he was silent. They could not calculate his moods.

Mortimer was a clerk, as Anne and Vera were clerks. The two girls were typists, while Mortimer was employed in a suburban branch office of one of the larger banks. All three lived in the neighbourhood of Kilburn, and, having the choice of only a few open spaces in nearer London, naturally turned to the central London parks, of which Hyde Park is the largest and perhaps the most agreeable. Upon another Sunday they would go to Hampstead Heath or to Regent's Park. To-night they were in their favourite resort. To all three of them Hyde Park was full of beauty, full of excitement. All three had young hearts which rendered them capable of finding delight in any situation that was not associated with the routine of office work. Every now and then, in the press of the crowd, their shoulders lightly touched. At all times they exchanged smiling glances of interest and comprehension. To each of them the hearts of the others were shrouded, so baffling and unknown to us are those with whom we are brought more than casually into contact. The gleam of Anne's teeth in a slow smile, the quick vivacity of Vera's lightly turned head, the silent assurance to be read in the greyish face of Mortimer, were all so many challenges to speculation. The three walked onward, increasingly hidden from each other as

the darkness fell. They turned from the broad pathway into one less crowded, hearing behind them the hum of voices and the hoarse sound of footsteps upon the gravelled path. It was more open here, and a warm breeze met them, fanning their faces and opening their hearts with rapture.

III

There was very little talk between the three friends. Vera never talked when Anne was present, and Anne was often silent. There was something in Anne which made it impossible for Vera to forget her. Something which made Vera aware of constraint in herself. Although the girls loved each other, Anne's quietness alarmed Vera, and made her guarded. Even now, in the darkness, Vera knew that Anne was there, invisible but powerful. She could not be forgotten. Vera looked up at the deep darkness of the sky, and imagined herself treading there into space, falling endlessly, as to a constantly receding feather cushion. The soft sky seemed to be attractive to her whole body, which so much desired complete relaxation, complete abandonment, that she was made unhappy by a sense of the shackles imposed by ordinary life. She loved the sky. She loved, too, the darkness. Did Mortimer so love the soft sky and the unreadable darkness? Impossible to ask him—impossible to express her feelings—before Anne. How unlike herself Anne was; how insensitive! There came a quick rebellious, lightning glance into the darkness to her left. Anne . . . Mortimer . . . Anne . . .

Anne was speaking.

"We ought to be getting home now," she said. "It's beautiful; but it's late."

Exactly. It was exactly what Anne *would* say! Late

—well, what did it matter? Why should they bother about lateness, if they were happy, if they were bathed in this lovely seclusion?

"It's only just dark!" cried Vera, impetuously. There was fierceness in her tone.

Mortimer had turned obediently along a path leading to the Marble Arch. He had not otherwise responded to Anne. He ignored Vera's protest. It might as well not have been made. Better had it not been made. Vera bit her lip. She continued to walk in silence upon Mortimer's right hand, her anger mounting.

IV

They reached the traffic-deafened streets, and were swept across in front of moving vehicles. There were taxicabs and automobiles and great red omnibuses which bore down upon them as huge liners might have done. It was one of these omnibuses that the three friends mounted, all climbing the narrow stairs to the upper deck and the fresh air. Vera, shrinking deeply into her mortified self, deliberately allowed the others to sit together, while she remained apart. Her heart was swollen. She was not tearful; her eyes were hard and dry. She was angry. She had received a wound. Always, with Anne or Mortimer, she must give way. With Anne—because Anne did not understand anything of feeling or sensation. With Mortimer because he was Mortimer. When the woman beside her left the omnibus, Vera slid along the seat and looked steadily down at the roadway, and the crowds of Sunday evening holiday-makers who promenaded below. Here starry lamps shone, here there were dark patches. Always there was a beautiful luminous quality in the darkness, as though the atmosphere were light and clear. Vera crouched in her seat, pre-

tending to watch, or watching with only half her attention. She could see the slow rise and fall of the omnibus rail, which made her think always of omnibuses as ships; she could feel the faint jarring of the vehicle as a thrill to her sensitive body. Sometimes she thought she could hear her own heart beating high in her breast.

Gradually Vera's anger subsided. A faint sense of shame stole into her heart. She became crestfallen, like a little girl who has cried without reason, who has been petulant. . . . She had been ignored. She had shown ill-temper in sitting apart. Had they noticed it? Had they laughed at her? Were they yet laughing? A quiver went through Vera at thought of the possibility. She looked aside at Mortimer, whose face she could vaguely determine. Anne she could not see at all. Mortimer was not speaking. He was not listening. He was sitting silent. As Vera tried with eyes that became blinder with her effort to read what was not there to see, she realized that Mortimer had turned exactly as she herself had turned, and was looking in her direction with studiousness equal to her own.

V

The journey ended, they bade farewell in the darkness to Mortimer, who, raising his hat, was immediately gone. The sisters thereupon entered their home, and the door was closed behind them. Something of her late feeling of antagonism to Anne again arose in Vera's breast, but it immediately relaxed. She was suddenly too tired to feel antagonism. They were together in the narrow hall of their little home, and in another few moments would be in the kitchen with their father and mother. Vera almost spoke, upon her first instinct of rebellion; then she controlled herself. It would have been silly to speak.

Anne would not have understood. She would have laughed. And so Vera held her tongue. She could not bear laughter.

The two girls called out that they were home, and went upstairs to the bedroom they shared. It was not a long journey, for the house contained only four rooms in all. The staircase was narrow and dark, the bedroom small and lighted by only a single jet of gas with a broken mantle. Two very low, narrow beds, amateurishly enamelled white, stood against opposite walls, and a white painted dressing table and washstand faced each other from the two walls. Two enamelled chairs and a mirror with an enamelled frame (over the mantelpiece) were the other pieces of furniture in the room, which otherwise had a square of cord carpet upon the floor and a profusion of unidentifiable flowers upon the walls. It was a very neat room, and very clean; but it was not very comfortable. There was, indeed, a small fender at the black fireplace, but the absence of fireirons was significant. At the window there were casement curtains and a yellow glazed holland blind which had already been drawn. If it had been open, the girls would have been able to see across their own small backyard and a common passage between the houses, other small backyards and the backs of houses similar to their own. For Vera the sight of the backyards and the other houses so near always meant distress, for they reminded her of the fetters by which her life was bound. She did not know how Anne felt about the other houses. She did not really know how Anne felt about anything in the world. Sometimes Anne exasperated her beyond bearing; and at others she was so droll that Vera could not keep from laughing.

They were together in the bedroom, and Vera, having thrown off her own hat, watched Anne patting her hair before the mirror. It was trim hair, almost free from

natural untidiness, but not quite. Vera frowned. Her own hair never looked tidy. All at once she noticed that Anne, standing there, was looking back at her in the mirror, and smiling. Vera sat down upon the edge of her own bed.

"I hated you for coming home so early," she said, breathlessly.

"Did you?" Anne smiled a little more broadly, but with tranquillity. She did not protest against being hated.

VI

They went downstairs to the kitchen, where Dad and Mum were. Dad was sitting in a yellow-painted wooden armchair something after the fashion of a grandfather's chair. He had his back to the table and the light, the beam of which was cast downwards by a newspaper shade over the gas-globe, and was reading *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* with the aid of a magnifying glass. He had carpet slippers upon his ample feet, and wore no coat. His shirtsleeves were clean, and he was newly shaved that day, except for a heavy bandmaster's moustache. He was a man of five-and-fifty, with greying hair and a rather repressive lack of interest in everything except news. He did not look up as the girls entered, but went on reading his inexhaustible newspaper through the magnifying glass.

Mum, at the other side of the table, mildly wore spectacles. She had discovered some very strange reading matter in a sheet of newspaper some months old which had been used by the butcher as wrapping for her Saturday night's purchase. The sheet was from a paper never otherwise introduced into the house, and Mrs. Treacher, being a thoroughly respectable woman, had smoothed out the sheet and was steadily plodding through the recitals

of unmentionable crimes against humankind. She was absorbed and sleepy, gaping every now and then, and fidgeting so that her ordinary windsor chair creaked a little. Spasmodically she pursued a fly which from time to time attacked the succulent paper in which she herself was taking so much interest. Mum was a very small, rather plump little woman, with cheeks that were thinned by her loss of teeth. She had very innocent eyes, from which she looked at the newcomers over the tops of her spectacles. That she was bored by the fly and by her reading-matter was shown in the readiness with which she folded her sheet of paper and laid it aside. Mum made no attempt to conceal the newspaper. For one thing it never occurred to her to do so; for another it would have been impossible to keep anything from Vera's sharp eyes.

"What a time to get home!" said Mum, gently.

Vera frowned at her.

"Anybody'd think we were children!" she burst out.

"You're *my* children," retorted Mum, rather smartly. "I was quite worried."

Vera gave a heavy sigh of exasperation.

"Oh, dear!" she ejaculated. And sat down at the table. "What's this?" Her eye fell upon the folded sheet of ancient newspaper. She took it fastidiously between finger and thumb, saw what it was, and let the paper drop. She felt more completely irritated than before. And from the corner of her eye she saw that her father was taking no notice of her, and that Anne—humdrum, material Anne!—was already opening the cupboard door to espy their supper. Vera made a smiling grimace—a grimace that showed her ruffled state, and a smile that showed her native sweetness of temper;—and started to her feet. But she did not say anything to Anne. What could she have said? If she had tried to speak, only one word would have come to her lips. *"You!"* she might

have said. She had instead a glimpse of Anne twenty years hence—an old maid doling out jam to little boys and girls, and keeping them in order. That was the glimpse Vera had of Anne. Anne was not yet, Vera knew, an old maid; but she had the right temperament for that fortune. Vera could never bring herself to admit that Anne was too pretty to be an old maid. Compared with other girls, Anne might be pretty; but Vera made only one comparison, and this, she felt, Anne could not sustain. So Vera did not say "You!" but very sensibly helped to get supper.

VII

An hour afterwards both girls were in bed in their little room. Not to sleep, however, for Vera lay awake thinking. Her head was thrown back upon the flat pillow, so that her chin was slightly raised. Ever and anon she smiled, hidden there in the darkness; and more than once she frowned deeply. All sorts of memories played in her mind—memories and imaginings. So many of them had to do solely with herself that they were tinged with the happy melancholy of youth. Such as were related to Mortimer produced the puzzled frown of speculation which has been mentioned. He had looked at her intently; he had been silent; he had seemed almost to ignore her. Strange, . . . strange. . . . Vera's heart beat ever so little faster. The smile came to her lips. She lay very still, absolutely silent but for the soft breathing that could not be heard above a yard away, save by one intently listening. She could hear continuing without cease that dull faint noise, akin to the sound one discovers in a seashell, which she knew to be London. It was very remote, very lulling, so ever present as almost to escape her attention. No other sound in the house . . . everybody

but herself must long have been asleep. Vera alone was wakeful; she alone had precious thoughts and beautiful lingering sensations to keep her from insensibility. She remembered Mortimer. . . .

And as Vera thus engaged pleasantly in a reverie which made her heart gently more rapid in its motion, she heard from the other side of the room, from that other little white-painted bed which was the twin of her own, a sharp sigh. It was followed immediately by an ejaculation which was nearly a groan.

"Oh, my *dearest* . . ."

That was all. Vera listened, her nerves alive and excited; but there was again complete silence. She could not hear Anne breathing or moving. She strained her ears until she fell suddenly asleep. By the morning Vera had forgotten all about this singular happening, but ere she slept she had already persuaded herself that she had been fantastically dreaming.

CHAPTER II: MR. HARROW AND OTHERS

I

"'IN reply to your letter we regret that we do not do the scuttle the shape you require. We have made inquiries concerning the same . . .'"

Vera had almost no need to set down in shorthand the words spoken by Mr. Harrow. She knew his formulæ by heart. Mr. Harrow's voice went on and on. It always seemed to be going on and on. It was one of those voices that rasp dejectedly upon the same dying note, that paralyse the listener's attentiveness . . . Visions of beautiful scuttles and hearths and beautiful fires behind burnished fenders rose before Vera's eyes. The firelight's reflection danced upon gleaming warmth and a darkened room of richness and voluptuous ease. She could hear the silvery ping of a clock striking a mysterious hour, see adorable vistas of luxury—soft-footed servants, who drew heavy curtains and shut out the evening murk and drizzle of a wintry city . . . It was a dream that Vera often indulged, this dream of comfort and plenty. A dream only. She sighed. She jerked herself quickly awake, and resumed her work, still smiling at the vision, and recalling it. Mr. Harrow, shuffling his papers as if they had been a bridge-hand, began afresh, addressing himself to another correspondent.

"'Dear Madam. Adverting to yours of the third instant . . .'"

Mr. Harrow, Vera knew, was twenty-eight. He was very fair and rather bald. The two front parts of his coat hung, like curtains, in folds, so hollow was his chest;

and his face was a dull white, with long creases in the cheeks. He always stood, while dictating letters, with one foot upon the rung of a chair. This attitude gave him confidence. At first he had used Vera's chair as his support, but Mr. Harrow's attitude, and the feeling that she was imprisoned by the detaining foot, had so suffocated Vera that her distaste had been uncontrollable. Mr. Harrow now used another, and auxiliary, chair. He was a very gentle man, full of earnest desire to please customers; and he consciously dictated wooden letters because he thought them businesslike. He was no fool. That was a mistake of Vera's. He was slow and deliberate, where she was quicksilver. It was an essential difference.

Presently, when Mr. Harrow had shuffled all his letters together for good and had left her, Vera jerked her chair, threw her notebook upon the table, and looked at the three other typists in the room. They were all wearisomely sallow and plain. They were Miss Westgate, Miss Ellis, Miss Smart. They perpetually touched their hair, went to wash their hands or to look up information in the main office and talk to the men there, made work last them for hours in order to seem busy and to avoid other work, had small mirrors in their desks to which they often referred, munched sweets, whispered, and looked askance at Vera. They were not unfriendly to her, but there was a barrier which Vera could never understand. She felt that they watched her, and observed her dresses; that in speaking to herself they used an accent more refined than that in which they whispered to each other. It was the more strange because Vera wanted them to like her. She was always kind to them, as if they were strange cats that she wished to stroke; and she could never establish intimacy with any of them.

"Did you hear what she said to me?" Miss Smart or Miss Westgate or Miss Ellis would whisper to the others,

as they put on their hats and coats. Vera to these ladies was always "she."

II

The room itself was a kind of compartment, an enclosure separated from the rest of a large office upon the second floor of Blankenburg's Universal Stores building by a partition of wood and frosted glass no more than eight feet high. Beyond that partition were other offices —some of them small rooms similarly partitioned, and others open to every eye, where male clerks were congregated in face of long high desks. The typewriting room was the one department staffed by girls. It was thus, to the men, as magnetic as a harem. Within its walls, each typist was about eight feet from her neighbour, and at the windows were additional desks for supplementary work or workers. Owing to the fact that the room was in a corner of the office it had two windows, one of which looked out upon a main thoroughfare, the other upon a very narrow side street. The room was very lofty. It was distempered a biscuit colour, and the windows were uncurtained.

On this morning, when Vera looked round before bringing out her first sheets of notepaper, she saw that Miss Westgate had left her place and was bending over Miss Smart's desk, in a whisper telling her something. Miss Westgate was evidently pleased at what she was able at last to communicate. Her face was full of self-consciousness. She would say a few words, pause, blurt out something more, and smile all over her face. And yet there was strain, too, in her manner, and Vera thought she looked odd, as though if she left off smiling she would cry. Miss Smart was Miss Westgate's special friend, and they always lunched together. Miss Smart was look-

ing up at Miss Westgate with her gooseberry-coloured eyes round and marvelling. Vera could hear her whispered exclamations. "O-oh!" "Did he?" "What did *you* say?" Then her delighted laughter, which had to be whispered also because of the need for secrecy. Vera saw Miss Westgate go back to her desk, which was laden with silly little mascots of every kind; saw her press the tips of her fingers hard against smiling lips that trembled. How strange! Miss Westgate's face was now hidden. She had stooped, picked up a letter book, and was busy turning its pages as if in search of something. Miss Smart, in a reverie, extracted and replaced a hairpin, still smiling. Her gooseberry-coloured eyes relaxed their smile. Vera thought there was a faint colour in her plump white cheeks; an acid, satirical turn to Miss Smart's ungenerous mouth. The perception sent a wave of emotion through her. Electrically she saw Miss Smart and Miss Westgate, not merely as other girls, or through her own taste, but as souls bare to the eye.

"Poor little thing!" Vera thought, concentrating upon Miss Westgate. She was full of pity. Her eyes softened. Her heart embraced Miss Westgate. And then, as if mechanically, she began to type: " 'Dear sir, In reply to your favour . . .' "

III

Miss Westgate's lips were a little swollen; her eyes were dark; colour came and went in her cheeks. She moved restlessly. She smiled to herself, and her expression immediately clouded. She looked pathetic and radiant by turn; but most often pathetic. Vera saw Miss Smart give several stealthy glances at Miss Westgate. Well, Miss Smart had heard a story from Miss Westgate, and she was now clearly engaged in putting together two sets of two and

two—the first set the one Miss Westgate had wished her to put, the second one that was purely her own concern. Vera saw that. It was as if Miss Westgate had shouted: "I'm in love. I think it is going to be all right. But I'm not sure. That is why I could not resist telling Gladys Smart; and now I'm sorry I told her. In case Walter *doesn't* . . ." And Miss Smart, having been the friend, was returned to a state of mind in which she maliciously speculated upon the prospects of disaster. She was turning over in her thoughts, as old women turn scraps of meat upon a butcher's bargain platter, all Miss Westgate's impulsive repetitions.

Hateful! Vera looked away from Miss Westgate and Miss Smart. Her heart was again flooded with pity for Miss Westgate and for all girls who were like her. She saw Miss Westgate's faults, which were silliness and a kind of soft emotionalism, but Miss Westgate was much nicer than Miss Smart. Miss Smart was hard and unkind. She was going to be either a semi-malicious old maid or the cause of disheartened wretchedness to man and child. Miss Smart was sandy; she had a longish, sharp-pointed nose, a narrow, thin-lipped mouth, very fair eyelashes, and pink rims to her gooseberry eyes. She was envious and uncharitable. Such whispered or murmured remarks as were meant to be audible and wounding to a third person in the office were always made by Miss Smart. That was her nature. She would hint and hide; and her reading of motives was invariably base. If she had not been so paltry she would have been dangerous. Miss Westgate was different. She was kind and silly and likeable. She was also very simple and truthful. She might have a thousand mascots, and be twice as silly, and yet she would still be nicer than Miss Smart and Miss Ellis. Vera could look at her, and did

look at her, with pity. It was not love, nor sympathy, but pity, such as one feels for a tethered animal, a calf in a sack, or a chicken in a small coop. For Miss Smart, on the other hand, Vera at times felt active dislike.

This morning Vera had supposed that Miss Smart would lunch as usual with Miss Westgate; but it was not so. Miss Smart gave Miss Westgate a little flying wave of the fingers, and hurried out early. She was evidently engaged elsewhere that day. Miss Westgate must have known this: hence the confidence made in the office. Miss Ellis followed in two or three minutes. Miss Westgate and Vera were thus alone together in the room; and they finished their work at the same moment. But Miss Westgate, reading over the letter which she had just typed, was obviously horrified at the mistakes in it. She stared, flushed deeply, and tore the letter into very small pieces.

"Idiot!" she ejaculated, and bit her lip.

A moment later she stood up, still holding the torn fragments in her hand. Nothing could describe Miss Westgate's air of forlornness. She had a nose that was too large for her white face, pale greeny eyes, limp, copious fawn-coloured hair; and suddenly the large nose grew pink and tears sprang to the greeny eyes. A sob shook her body. Quickly as she turned away, Miss Westgate knew that she could not disguise her emotion. She looked hastily at Vera, swallowed quickly, looked away; and at last blurted out, in great gulps, half crying:

"I'm sorry. You'll think I'm silly. I can't help it. I . . . personal matters . . ."

"I don't think you're at all silly," cried Vera, impulsively. "I'm very sorry if you're unhappy."

"Oh, it's . . . nothing . . . nothing to be sorry for," cried Miss Westgate, still gulping. Her smile dawned again, through the tears, like a grimace. "It's only that

I'm silly." And with that she fairly began to cry, blowing her nose, and wiping her eyes, smiling, shaking her head. "I'm very silly," she repeated.

"I know," said Vera—hardly knowing what she said, but concerned deeply with this pitiful distress. Her own voice was sad enough.

"I shouldn't have thought you'd have minded," presently said Miss Westgate, drying her tears, but still speaking in a grizzling tone.

"I?" Vera was puzzled.

There was no answer. The two exchanged a look; and upon both sides this look was one of bewilderment. Vera might have said, "But I *do* mind!" She did not do so. She was made dumb by the knowledge that Miss Westgate regarded her as a stranger. They said nothing more. They stood silent, near each other, and far away. In a few moments Miss Westgate, quite recovered, moved to go out to lunch; and so, with a smile, they parted.

IV

To Vera it was a mystery that Miss Westgate could confide in Miss Smart and not in herself. There could not be any comparison between herself and Miss Smart. She shook her head as she put on her hat. In the mirror she saw her own face—a very small face, from which dark eyes at this moment looked gravely from beneath arched brows. Vera had a very straight, slender nose, and a mouth that was small, curved, and serious. Her face was at one moment alight with expression, and at another—not dead (never that), but sad and lacking in vivacity. Animated, it was full of curves and beauties; in repose it drew the eye because, behind the piquancy of the features, there was a hint of unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Vera looked sad now, and puzzled

also; and her glance into the mirror held neither vanity nor coquetry. At last she turned away, still grave, still perplexed, and went through the main office and down the stairs and out into the hot street.

"Poor thing," thought Vera, as she trudged off to lunch at a Tarratonga tea shop. "Poor thing. She's in love. How can she be so silly as to tell Gladys Smart! So *silly* of her. I'd die rather than tell somebody like Gladys Smart. She's horrid. She smiles so. I believe that she'd be glad if it went wrong—if he *didn't*. I'm sure she'd be glad. It would make her feel less inferior. That's why people are glad. Cruel girl: she always wants other people to be unhappy . . ." Vera's mind took a leap. She wondered about Sheila Westgate's lover. Her next conscious thought was: "A horrid man with great hands and a moustache . . ." And then: "I'd hate to fall in love with somebody I didn't like."

V

The afternoon wore slowly on, and Miss Ellis (whose turn it was) made tea; and Mr. Harrow and Mr. Belper, with whose connivance tea was brewed each day, came in to share it. All of them sat drinking the tea, the men perched upon corners of desks; and Mr. Harrow showed the party some snap-shots of himself taken in company with a shaggy white dog and a motor cycle. Mr. Harrow in the photograph wore a leather coat, motoring leggings, and a furry-edged cap. He looked like an aviator. The costume suited him, and only the lines in his cheeks reminded Vera of Mr. Harrow as she saw him daily.

A wooden shed formed the background to the snap-shots; and Mr. Harrow told them that this had been bought in sections and erected by himself with the aid of

a friend. It stood at the side of his parents' house in Raynes Park. Mr. Belper was greatly impressed by the shed; but the girls all preferred Mr. Harrow's shaggy white dog. They said, "Oh, what a lovely dog!" "Isn't he a *duck!*" "How smart you look, Mr. Harrow; is your coat leather?" etc. Mr. Belper said gloomily: *"I'd* like a shed like that. Useful for tools and things . . ." and sank into a thoughtful state. Mr. Belper was married. He had married young, and at the age of eight-and-twenty was inclined to speak darkly of feminine psychology. He referred to women as "they."

Vera alone made no remark. She did not really enjoy looking at the snapshots. For some reason she was irked by the sight of Mr. Harrow in so romantic a costume. She was also irritated by Mr. Harrow's mild complacency over the photographs; and irritated by the gushing phrases of the girls, who were all behaving in a kittenish, self-conscious way, and being very girlish. Moreover, Mr. Harrow had stood disconcertingly behind her chair as she looked through the collection and when he pointed to the bicycle in one of the snapshots and tapped it—for Mr. Belper's benefit—in emphasising its perfection, his arm had more than once pressed against her shoulder, as if by accident.

She was glad when the men were gone, and when the girls could wash the teacups and put them away.

"Wasn't Harrow funny about his old motor-bike!" said Miss Smart, presently. She gave a little satirical laugh. "You'd think one didn't know scores of fellows who had them. I thought he was going to ask us all to go riding on the pillion."

They laughed at that. It seemed to them all quite a daring remark. Vera alone shuddered in secret. How awful it would have been.

"I shouldn't have gone," cried Miss Westgate.

"There'd have been a terrible silence," said Vera.

"We shouldn't have known where to look!" It was Miss Ellis who exclaimed.

"Oh, he wouldn't have asked us all," scoffed Miss Smart. "Only one of us."

"Which one?"

Vera did not know who had asked the question; but Miss Smart looked straight down her nose and ignored it. Then there was a diversion.

"I once went on a pillion," said Miss Ellis reminiscently. "I was never so frightened in my life. We whizzed along at a hundred miles an hour. It *seemed* a hundred. I hung on to the man like anything."

The others laughed archly.

"I don't expect he minded," said Miss Smart.

Miss Ellis also laughed a little.

"I don't think he did," she murmured sentimentally.

Miss Smart looked impatiently at Miss Ellis.

"That's what I meant," she explained, her eyes narrowed with contempt.

Miss Ellis became silent. Vera, dark-eyed, turned to her work, resolutely shutting her ears to whatever might follow. Silly women! Had they nothing to think of but men? Nothing to think of, nothing to speak of! It wasn't only that. It was that they made it all up. Often enough there were no men. They had imagined . . .

And at this point Vera fell again to thoughts of Mortimer.

VI

It was still quite light when she left the office upon her homeward way. She walked to catch her omnibus, and with some difficulty eluded Mr. Harrow, who was standing at the general entrance to the offices. He had

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done this before, and Vera read his purpose. He would have walked with her to the omnibus if she had given him the smallest encouragement to do so. For this reason she dawdled for an instant upon the stairs, allowed Miss Ellis to precede her, took the last flight at some pace, and almost ran past Mr. Harrow, nodding "good-night" as she went.

Once Vera, quite breathless, was aboard her bus, and was able to look down from its swaying height, she was happy. The motion of the vehicle was delicious, and she was absorbed in the people she saw below her. There were poor women with bundles and children, men in tall hats who looked like commercial travellers or cabinet ministers, workmen, clerks, strange unoccupied youths with white neckerchiefs knotted at their throats who looked as if they might be thieves—all sorts of white faces which, in the rapid progress of the omnibus, swam together in an exhilarating blur of moving life. Above them shops of every kind, blackened buildings, the smoke-greyed blue sky, that seemed full still of the day's heat. And always a lovely caressing pressure of wind upon her face, giving her life.

The omnibus travelled very fast through the streets. It swept along northward like a great ship. Vera could shut houses and shops out of her vision at will, and dream of white sails, a foam-tipped sea, and waiting adventure. Presently, as familiar buildings swam into view, another exhilaration possessed her. She was as one immersed in the observance of ritual. Precisely here she must rise, stagger to the stair, clutch the hand-rail, descend . . . She did all these things, jumped neatly, and, as she alighted, began immediately to walk towards home at a quick pace. She walked so swiftly and with such grace that she drew the attention of every roving eye.

Vera drew the attention, also, of a pedestrian whose eye

was not roving. He, with a start, saw her before him, increased his own speed, and hurried in pursuit.

"Vera!"

She stopped and turned. Her cheeks were a little flushed from walking, and her eyes were bright. Her heart was fluttering. With a smile, she waited; and the young man who followed was immediately by her side, apparently cool and undistressed by his eager pursuit. The young man was Mortimer.

CHAPTER III: A MEMORY, A WORD

I

ALMOST in silence, they reached the little house where the Treachers lived. It was of yellow-brown brick, with a grey slate roof, built like a box, with two rooms below and two rooms above. As the front door opened they caught the smell of cooking, which hung in the dark, narrow passage as it always did in the evenings. It clung to the little hall like a fog, choking Vera. Almost with a shudder, while Mortimer hung his hat upon a peg, she ran upstairs, turning as she reached the landing to cast one glance down upon Mortimer. She saw the little cock of his head, the turn of his shoulder; had the sense of his distinction, his pallor, the almost sensual refinement of his carriage; and then lost sight of him. He was going into the kitchen, where her mother was.

That odour, that darkness, that glimpse of Mortimer going into the kitchen, were to stay for ever in Vera's memory. She had received so strong an impression that she stood quite still in the bedroom, as one who listens. Only with an effort did she shake the reverie from her. In silence thereafter, and without thought, she washed her face and hands and tidied her hair; but she all the time re-pictured the glimpse she had had of Mortimer. She knew, further, what the kitchen looked like, with supper laid, with her mother passing and re-passing to and from the scullery, with Mortimer sitting upon one of the wooden chairs, his head turning, dark—very dark, with a gleam of light in all that he did, in every glance, like a pearl. The kitchen, too, would be dark, lighted

only for Vera by Mortimer's presence. It would be dark and clouded with the same smell of dinner and soap and home . . .

Truly, the picture was as she had imagined. When Vera entered the tiny room, and heard her mother in the scullery, dishing up the supper, and calling out mild remarks to Mortimer in a disjointed way that betrayed her divided attention, Vera almost laughed at her own exactitude. There was Mrs. Treacher in the scullery, half hidden in clouds of steam; there was the dull kitchen, the square, plain table with a bare white cloth upon it, shabby old knives with yellowed handles and worn blades, shabby old forks and spoons from which the plate had long been rubbed, odd dishes chipped and darkened by wear. And near the window, with his back to the fading daylight, looking away from the light, away from the room, away from everything that was ugly and customary, was Mortimer, very pale and handsome, the last man in the world to be sitting amid a scene of this disorder. The blackened ceiling was low, the wallpaper was browned and specked, the chairs were plain and repulsive. Only Mortimer was like burnished steel in the opal light from the window.

II

At Vera's entrance, Mrs. Treacher popped her head out of the scullery.

"Oh, it's still you," she said, as if disappointed.

"Yes, I'm still me, mother," cried Vera, rather indignantly. "Who d'you want me to be?"

"Anne's not home yet," replied her mother.

"I know."

"She's been kept late again. It's a great shame." Mrs. Treacher began feebly to bustle about, her innocent

old eyes foolishly anxious. "They're so fussy about everybody being punctual in the mornings; and yet they keep her like this. It's sickening. Night after night, it is; and what's to be done? It's too bad—isn't it, Mortimer! It's not fair to the girl."

Vera took an impatient step, the faintest frown showing. She could not restrain a glance at Mortimer that was of lightning speed, so swift as to be unseen. His face was dim in that light, which came from behind him.

"Oh, she's all right, mother." Vera's foot tapped.

"She's *not* all right, Vera. That shows you know nothing about it."

Mrs. Treacher stopped moving towards the scullery, and addressed her younger daughter with firmness. Vera knew that to her mother she was still a baby. That she constantly received the disappointments courted by impulsiveness she too well knew. It made her mother's rebuke no more acceptable. Mrs. Treacher, in delivering the rebuke, looked pleasantly ridiculous, for she was very small and plump and toothless, with round, black-rimmed spectacles, and little surprised eyes; and her dignity, although convincing, was incongruous.

"Isn't Anne well?" suddenly demanded Mortimer, at this.

Vera felt her breath catch. What a strange voice!

"Perfectly well," she assured him, as if in expostulation. "As well as can be. But mother's an old worrier, and always was, and always will be; where Anne's——"

"Now, Vera!" warningly cried Mrs. Treacher. "I don't like you to talk like that."

Vera frowned.

"You know it's true, Mum," she protested.

"Both of you the same." The firmness was underlined. It became a definite reproof.

This time Vera smiled.

"All right, Mum," she said. "Where's the lid of the mustard pot?"

"*I* don't know, dear. Look about."

"I started out to walk down the High Road thinking I might see her," proceeded Mortimer, following a train of thought, and ignoring what had more recently been said. He spoke quite naturally, unaware of Vera's quick glance or of his indiscretion.

Her—Anne? Vera's heart was stabbed. Anne? He had set out to meet Anne? It was ridiculous. Anne, the practical, unfeeling, constraining Anne . . . Yet Mortimer had said "Anne"—as if Anne . . . A terrible coldness came over Vera's heart, over her eyes, her cheeks. She was as if changed into marble. Twice her lips parted, as if she would speak; and, each time, the words would not come. He had not meant to see herself. It was Anne he had meant to see. *Anne.*

Slowly Vera's eyes closed. Her breath came quickly. Her head was raised, and her mouth twisted. Then, instinctively, she moved away, so that her back was to Mortimer.

A moment later there came a slight familiar sound. A click, a soft thud, a hurried step. They all heard what she had heard. They all listened, glancing at each other.

"There's Anne," said Vera, in a dead voice. And watched Mortimer, hardly breathing.

CHAPTER IV: ANNE

I

IT seemed a long time before Anne came into the room, and yet it was only a moment. They all strained their ears a little, following her quiet, quick movements as she ran down the stairs from the bedroom, and as she turned the handle of the kitchen door. The little house was so small, the walls so thin, and the woodwork so unseasoned, that all progress about the house was audible. And at last Anne was there. She was smiling, brisk and cheerful. She was faintly flushed, as if she had been hurrying, and in that swift entry her slim body had as much vivacity, as much hint of electric energy, as Vera's own. She too, as Vera instinctively recognised, was young and elastic; she too had charm for the eye and the heart. Her eyes were clear, and her complexion beautiful. Her nose was as straight as Vera's, and as delicate. The arched brows were full of character and loveliness. It was a sweet and attractive face in which an expression of seriousness and roguery was combined with regularity of feature. Nobody, looking upon Anne, could have refrained from looking a second time. There came sweeping through Vera's intuition something that was cousin to fear.

All three of those who waited were conscious of Anne, and responsive to her. Mortimer had risen; Mrs. Treacher, in quick movement, paused to throw a loving, anxious glance. Vera was withdrawn against the wall, intent upon the scene, but with her heart beating so fast that she could think of nothing but the need to keep very still, and absolutely silent.

"Hullo, Mortimer!" cried Anne. "I wondered if you'd be here. Hullo, Mum. Sorry to be so late. I had to finish some filing."

"It's not fair," grumbled Mrs. Treacher. "The supper might have been spoilt." She shook her head.

"Mr. Sims has dinner at eight. He told me so. He couldn't imagine anybody wanting to get away. He says really fashionable people dine at nine."

"Why, whatever for?" Mrs. Treacher was aghast at such an unnatural meal-time. She clucked her tongue. "Tut-tut. Wasting the fine evening like that!"

"How does *he* know?" demanded Vera, impatiently.

"Ask Mr. Sims," was Anne's prompt reply to both—simultaneous—questions. "Mr. Sims knows everything about fashionable people."

"Who *is* Mr. Sims?" asked Mortimer, in a sudden, sharp voice.

Vera almost groaned aloud at his tone. It pierced her. But Anne, pouncing upon the lid of the mustard-pot, which she had descried upon the dresser, placed it where it belonged, and showed no sense of any urgency in Mortimer's remark. Her eyes met those of Mrs. Treacher, who began obediently to dish the supper and bring it to table. In the scullery steam was redoubled, and the savoury smell unmistakable.

"Oh, he's Mr. Sims," coolly answered Anne, as if that were sufficient explanation. She turned towards Mortimer, and her lids flickered for an instant. After the first greeting she had not seemed to be conscious of Mortimer, and even now she treated him with something akin to irony. Taking a dish as she spoke from Mrs. Treacher's hands, she laid it in its place. Then, apparently relenting, she continued: "Mr. Sims is the new partner at Kilburn's."

"I haven't heard of him," said Mortimer, reflecting.

"*We* have!" breathed Vera. "Every day, lately."

"Well?" Mortimer looked steadily at Anne, who seemed absorbed in the table.

"Well, he's only been there a few weeks."

"What's he like?"

"He's an organizer."

"A terror," supplemented Vera.

"He *is*, rather. He's like a lawyer, and can't trust his memory. So we've got great new filing cabinets and boxes and books . . . He believes that if you put everything in boxes and make lists, and do everything in triplicate, you're somehow more efficient. He makes a lot of lumber, and a lot of confusion, too, because the records can never be found. That makes him cross."

Mortimer laughed.

"I expect it does," he agreed. "And what's he like to look at?"

Vera watched; but Anne did not look up.

"He's a very short glistening dark man," she said, hesitatingly. "And he's got little fat olive cheeks, and little fat olive hands; and not very nice eyes, and a sort of snubby nose. It's not a true snub, but something rather like."

Again Anne paused, thinking, apparently, of Mr. Sims.

"Now, children!" Mrs. Treacher entered with the supper.

They all stared, fascinated, at the steaming dish which she set in front of her own place at the table. Vegetable dishes were already upon the table. A great cloud of appetising vapour rose up from the meat and the dumplings and the gravy which crowded Mum's dish.

"Oh, Mum!" Vera's horror at the sight of steaming boiled beef upon such a warm evening became uncontrollable. She could not restrain her exasperated protest. "As if it wasn't hot enough already!"

"Sh, sh, sh!"

Vera was ready to weep. She almost feverishly caught at the back of a chair, to bring it to the table. But Mortimer sprang up, took the chair, and placed it for her. Their hands were simultaneously upon the chair-back, their shoulders together, their faces close. Mortimer seemed magnified by proximity. Vera saw his cheek, his full clean lips, and the eyes, veiled and secret, which she would have given so much to read. She trembled. She saw Mortimer place a chair also for Anne.

II

They all sat down in the dark little kitchen, round the rough cloth and the dark dishes and the shabby knives and forks, while Mrs. Treacher carved the meat and sent each plate upon its journey.

"That's Mortimer's," she said. The steam was less now, but it rose still, and the meat glistened as she cut it.

"I want to hear more about Mr. Sims," cried Mortimer, accepting his plate.

"Oh, dear!" and "O-oh!" came the two responses. Anne and Vera both groaned after their respective fashions.

"Go along, Anne," urged Mrs. Treacher, pushing her spectacles into position with the back of her hand, and at the same time giving the tip of her nose a gentle surreptitious rub.

"All right," said Anne, resignedly. "Yes, he goes to night clubs every night."

"Oh, he's *that* sort, is he." Mortimer shrugged his shoulders.

"And he dances till four in the morning. You can *tell* that, somehow. You feel he's seen life. At least,

a not very good kind of life. It's the way his eyelids droop, and the way he looks at you, as if he was calculating. He looks sideways, very boldly. And as if he's making up his mind about you all the time, and judging you by everything you say. I don't like him when he does that."

"I should think not!" exclaimed Mrs. Treacher. "Good gracious! Pass the mustard, Vera. No, dear; the *mustard*. What's the matter with you to-night?"

Anne hurried on.

"He's rung up on the telephone all day long by all sorts of girls who ask him to dances and things. I have to answer them first—the bold things! You'd laugh to hear some of the voices—they're so haughty when they find it's a woman speaking. They say, "The-et you, Edgar?" or "Is that you-ou-ou?"—very lingeringly . . .

"*What* a way to go on!" Mrs. Treacher spoke with her mouth full, thoroughly revolted by such behaviour.

"And then Mr. Sims speaks to them. Of course, I'm in the room all the time. He's always so polite, and yet he treats them as if they were nothing at all. He's insolent to them. He talks all the time as if he was half-asleep—drawlingly; but I think that's the way he was educated. He's a tremendous dandy, with beautiful ties and socks, and shoes that fit him. He takes terrible care of the creases in his trousers. Not like you, Mortimer."

"Oh, I'm above that sort of thing," interrupted Mortimer.

"You'll never be really smart, you know."

"Who wants him to be?" cried Vera.

"*I* certainly don't," agreed Anne, with a mischievous glance at the two of them. "At least, I haven't any *hope*. Well, and he's snappy, and rather conceited, and he despises everybody but himself. And he thinks everybody

is bothering about him, and criticising him, when really they're only trying to be polite . . ."

Anne paused longer than usual at this point.

"You seem to know a lot about him," objected Mrs. Treacher.

"He tells me everything," retorted Anne. "He's rather uncomfortable to have anything to do with, because he's so insulting. He doesn't mean to be, but he's horribly insulting. He can't help it—he was born sneering, like Pooh Bah. It's just that he—oh, he's horribly rude."

"Horrid man altogether, I should think." Vera could not control her vicious, breathless tone. "I'm tired of Mr. Sims."

"Well, I'm rather tired of him myself, sometimes," sighed Anne. "I can't get away from him. I'm his secretary, and I have to be there all the time."

"Good gracious," said Mrs. Treacher. "I don't wonder you're sick of him. Give me *home*. Don't you think so, Mortimer?"

"He's certainly very interesting," murmured Mortimer, thoughtfully moving a crumb upon the cloth with his forefinger.

"Why, even Mr. Harrow's better than he is," cried Vera. "At any rate, he's human!"

"Ah, how's old Harrow?" asked Mortimer, looking at Vera for the first time during the meal. "Still adverting to your favour?"

Vera did not respond to his gibe. Her head was down. There was a calm, brotherly interest in Mortimer's voice when he spoke of Mr. Harrow. Something different had been there at the mention of Mr. Sims. Then, he had seemed alarmed . . . eager.

"Mr. Harrow's not so bad," Vera said seriously. "On the whole. Take him altogether."

There was general laughter at her lugubrious tone.

"Poor Vera," sympathised Anne. "He must really be trying."

"But what about Mr. Sims?" demanded Mortimer. "*He's* no angel, it appears."

"*I* don't want your sympathy!" Vera's lips were parted. She looked sorrowful.

"Well, I feel I can *deal* with Mr. Sims, somehow. He *is* a sort of gentleman."

"So's Mr. Harrow!"

Mortimer looked interested.

"He's evidently improving," he rallied. "Good for Harrow!"

"Compared with Mr. Sims——" Vera could not trust herself to complete the sentence. She was choking. "I'm very *fond* of Mr. Harrow," she added defiantly. And then, a moment later: "And he likes me, too!"

III

She did not tell them about Mr. Harrow. She did not tell them that he had waited for her upon the stairs, that he was always considerate to her, that he showed her a deference which was not part of his usual behaviour to typists. As it was, thinking her childish, they laughed at her tone. Let them laugh! Let them laugh and despise her if they wished! How wretched she felt! She could not eat; she could hardly sit still. Anne . . . Anne sitting there, making fun of her . . . Anne, treacherous, intriguing Anne, taking Mortimer's thoughts and attention; taking Mortimer's . . .

Vera's mind slurred the word "love." She could not use it. She laid down her knife and fork, staring straight in front of her, for an instant forgetful of everything save her own pain.

Anne was talking. Anne and Mortimer were talking.

What were they saying? Nothing, nothing. They were talking, but they were saying nothing. Anne was not looking at Mortimer: Mortimer was looking at Anne. He was looking strangely at Anne, and speaking to her. He was explaining something as to which Anne had asked a question. She had asked him something so that he might be forced to admire her, and give her his attention. Mortimer, quite deceived, was answering. It wasn't that Anne really wanted to know the answer to her question. She had merely wanted to show how intelligent she was——

To herself Vera laughed scornfully. Then she listened.

". . . Nobody can tell," Mortimer was saying. "Some people have said that *we* don't exist at all. They say we're only—sort of—abstractions."

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Treacher, with a puzzled frown.

"Whose abstractions?" asked Anne. "It sounds like the Red King's dream."

Mortimer shook his head, smiling.

"Jolly substantial," he admitted. "I'm not saying what *I* think, mind you."

"What *do* you think?" asked Anne.

Ah—Vera saw her cunning! She was to flatter, to please!

"I don't know," said Mortimer. And then, adroitly: "What do *you*?"

"I think we exist all right," said Anne. "If you were to tell me that Mum or Vera were anybody's abstractions——"

"What's 'abstractions'?" demanded Vera.

"What somebody's just thought—made up—imagined," said Anne.

"Ridiculous!" cried Vera. "Fancy thinking a thing like that!"

"Well are you so *sure*?" Mortimer turned to Vera. His eyes were upon her. She felt them. She looked back into them, hardly breathing. He went on. "What is *anything?* We all feel that we exist. We think we're good, and honest, and kind. Other people don't think we are. They think *they* are. Think of the books you read—how you put yourself in the place of the characters. *You're* the heroine always; not another girl."

Vera flinched. Her heart beat faster. Her cheeks flushed slightly. "Who says so?"

"It's not that at all. We *all* think it. *We're* the heroes and heroines. Only when somebody else reads the book, he or she thinks—feels—exactly the same. Feels it applies to him, to her; and lives quite full of the sense. See what I mean?"

"I don't think I'm the heroine," said Vera, passionately. "As a rule I think the heroine's a fool."

"Well, aren't *you?* Aren't we all?"

"What?" The crimson deepened. "All *what?*"

"Fools—heroines—heroes. Anything you like."

"*I* don't think so."

Mortimer again smiled, not derisively, but with some understanding.

"Neither do they."

"Yes," interposed Anne. "I see what you mean. That's why nobody ever wants to change places with somebody else. They want to be as rich, and as happy; but they don't want to change in themselves."

Her head was a little sunk. She was thoughtful. Mrs. Treacher yawned slightly.

"Pass your plate, Vera," she said, taking Mortimer's, and scraping what was left upon it into a heap upon her own plate.

Vera did as she was told, her heart swelling. Did he really think her a fool?

IV

After supper the three young people went for a walk. Vera had wanted not to go; but she had wanted even more to go. They walked in the soft evening air through side roads to Hampstead, and all about them was the dying gold of the afternoon and the creeping opal shadow of twilight. Sounds came from a long distance. The houses were all illumined by the intensifying light. The three walked along for the most part in silence, deep in their own eager thoughts. Vera was listening—for what, she did not know. She listened, and she glanced; but for all her care she saw and heard nothing that brought knowledge to her heart. She remained ignorant of that which she sought to learn. Yet Anne from time to time spoke a little to Mortimer, and Mortimer answered her.

"Isn't it funny," said Anne, as they walked, "how we mean so well, and do such silly and horrible things."

"Horrible?" responded Mortimer. "I shouldn't have thought you ever did anything horrible."

"Perhaps I don't. I don't mean to. But I wasn't thinking really of myself. I was thinking of what you were saying at supper; and thinking about Mr. Sims. It seems strange that perhaps Mr. Sims isn't—well, isn't what *I* think he is. He *must* think he's nice and kind."

"Perhaps he doesn't." Mortimer was not at all convinced by her new interpretation of Mr. Sims. "Some people want to be wicked."

"No. I don't think that."

"What, then?"

"I think they're sometimes ashamed of what they've done; and frightened. And then they—brazen it out. If somebody does something wicked—is she to be punished for it for ever after?"

"Or 'he,'" added Mortimer. Vera saw his pale face in this beautiful light, and she could have persuaded herself that it gleamed. "I expect they're punished."

"For one wickedness?"

"For being wicked."

"Ah—I wish I knew what was wicked," murmured Anne, and fell silent.

V

They were going up a road towards Hampstead. Very prosperous red-brick houses, each with a gravel sweep in front of it, were to be seen upon either side of the road. Touched by the beauty of the evening, and perhaps by the unexpectedly serious turn which the conversation had taken, Vera walked slightly apart from the others. There were lovely scents in the air, and beautiful sounds which soothed her. She was calmer now, less wounded, less jealous; all her hostilities made faint and delicate by her thoughts. Mortimer, too, was silent, as if he was dreaming; and Anne, rather sadly, continued to think of what they had been discussing.

As if it all mattered! Vera was pitying in her thoughts, rather than impatient. They talked as though it mattered what they believed. Vera knew better than that.

Absorbed in her defiance of intellectualism, Vera, lagging behind, did not hear the sound of a motor-horn from one of the gravelled sweeps. She was dawdling, and her eyes were fixed. A car, which came quickly from a gate upon her right hand, gave another loud screech. Its brakes caused the tyres to grind into the gravel. Mortimer, leaping back, caught Vera roughly from the front of the car. It was all practically instantaneous—the horn, the skirr of the wheels, Mortimer's sudden, violent action. Vera was untouched. She awoke to find herself safe, to

hear Mortimer in a passionate tone raging at the driver of the car. He was beside himself.

"You silly fool!" he shouted roughly. "Why the hell don't you look——"

There followed a tornado. Mortimer was deadly white. His eyes flashed. He seemed tall and vehement, a raging fury. The driver of the car, at first apologetic, was angered. Reddening, he accelerated sharply and went upon his way, leaving the three friends standing upon the pavement. Vera still trembled, and Mortimer followed the disappearing car with savage looks and violent exclamations. All were out of tune.

"Mortimer!" at last said Anne, very gently.

He looked at her, frowning. His lips still quivered. Slowly his excitement ebbed, and the sparkle died from his face. He looked quickly, with a smile, from Anne to Vera, from Vera to Anne.

"Well, you *are* a little juggins," Mortimer said at last, to Vera. "You might have been killed." It was clear that he had recovered his self-control, for the passion was gone from his eyes and they were again soft. The three went onward, resuming their walk; but Anne was talking now, as if nothing had happened, about a friendly troop of dogs she had seen running together from street to street.

Vera did not listen. She was remembering.

VI

When the girls were alone together that night, and were undressing, Vera forgot a great deal of her pain. She had resolved to be very cool with Anne, and to feign indifference; but she could not feign indifference to Anne. She could feign very little with Anne. And now, when she was so close to Anne in their little room with the

white bedsteads and the flowered wallpaper, and when Anne smiled at her so kindly, Vera could not be cold. The ugly thoughts of Anne which had stained her mind earlier had now no place. A wave of shame made her eyes moist, and she turned away, because both Vera and Anne professed to despise tears. Speechless, Vera jumped into bed. Instead of lying down, however, she sat upright, her hands lightly clasped upon the coverlet.

Anne was brushing her hair; and Vera could see moving shadows, and a glimpse in the little mirror of Anne's brow and eyes. The brow was broad and open, and the eyebrows were very arched. Anne had dark eyes that in repose were grave, and they were grave now, as if she were absorbed in her task. Only Vera knew how quickly a light of mischief came into those eyes. Vera, too, was thoughtful, watching Anne, seeing her delicate slimness, and remembering all that had happened. Her heart was full.

Anne gave her a quick look as she blew out the candle, but it was nothing. Vera caught no expression. Then she heard Anne get into bed also. She saw her slip down and lie very still; and, after a moment, Vera, too, lay at full length. They were silent in the darkness that was no darker than twilight.

If Mortimer loved Anne! Vera moved restlessly Perhaps he loved both; perhaps neither. Neither . . . She trembled. But if Mortimer loved Anne better than herself, it would not be Anne's fault. Anne was not horrid. Anne was . . . The fault would be her own. The fault would be that when she was with Mortimer something always went wrong. He must think her silly and selfish and petulant . . .

"I'm not really," Vera breathed to herself. "Not *really.*"

"What?" asked Anne, from the other side of the room.

Vera bit her lip. Dare she risk the sound of her voice?

"I didn't say anything," she answered, with difficulty.

There was a brief silence. Then, urgently, from Anne: "Are you all right?"

"Yes." This time Vera trusted too much. There was a broken note. Anne sat up in bed.

"What is it, duckie?" Her voice was warm, loving. "Vera—has somebody hurt you?"

Vera tried to answer. She could not do so. Her throat seemed to be swollen, so that she could not speak. She was ashamed, and tried again to answer "No." She heard Anne move sharply, as if she were throwing back the bedclothes.

"No, no!" cried Vera, desperate in her struggle for composure. "Nothing. Nothing." But her voice was strangled.

Anne was by her side in the darkness. Anne's hands were at her shoulders, Anne's warm breast against her cheek.

"Tell me," Anne was whispering. "What is it, my duckie?"

Again Vera held her breath, trying hard not to cry, not to break into tears within these loving arms. Chokingly, in a fierce loud voice, she accused herself.

"It's only that I'm such a *beast,*" she vehemently said.

"No."

"Hateful."

Still Vera did not cry, although her anguish was intense. She was pressed close in Anne's strong young embrace.

"You couldn't be."

"Yes."

"You're unhappy. You oughtn't to be unhappy."

"Yes, I ought."

Anne gave her a little shake.

"You're a goose," she said.

"I'm horrid."

"Silly. Not horrid. Silly to *think* yourself horrid. When you're so nice."

"I'm not nice."

"Ever so nice."

Anne gave a low laugh, and kissed her sister.

"After all," she said, "it's not for you to say if you're nice or not. It's for me. You can't be unprejudiced."

"But you don't know."

"I know this. And I'm not going to have you calling yourself names. You're just an old silly, as you very well know. Aren't you?"

"No!" protested Vera.

Anne laughed again, and gave her a little quick hug. And before she knew that she was going to do such a thing, Vera, near as she had been to the reverse of laughter, had begun to laugh faintly in return. Her heart was strangely eased.

Only later, long afterwards, when her thoughts were misting with sleepiness, did Vera realise that once again she had been conquered by Anne.

CHAPTER V: MEETING

I

IT was Saturday afternoon. Anne was at the theatre with one of the other girls from Kilburn's office, and Vera was at home in the box-like house. The day was very warm, but it was cloudy, and the sun was rarely to be seen. Indoors, the atmosphere was close—so close that Vera found it hard to bear. She had helped her mother to wash up the dishes after the midday meal, had changed her dress, and was now wondering how she was to spend the afternoon. The outlook from the bedroom window was horrible. The heat had drained all colour from the houses, and the clouds had smothered them with dreariness. Vera crept out of the little bedroom and down the stairs. She peeped into the kitchen, and stood there for quite a minute, withdrawing her head only after a long and unsparing scrutiny of Dad and Mum.

For Dad and Mum, after dinner, had each taken a chair in the kitchen. Each had begun to read a newspaper. Dad had lighted his pipe, and if she had not known Dad Vera might have believed that he would spend the afternoon smoking and reading. The glimpse she now had of her two parents showed her what was really going to happen. They sat as still as stone, and did not move when Vera stealthily opened the door. Dad's head had fallen back, and his mouth was slightly open under the heavy bandmaster's moustache. His pipe, the bowl of it still clasped between the gigantic thumb and forefinger, rested upon his knee. His magnifying

glass was upon his newspaper, and both lay unheeded at his feet. Mum, not much more than a yard away, sat meekly erect as if she were in fact reading; but the eyes behind her black-rimmed spectacles were closed. She slept as a cat sleeps, hardly appearing to breathe. The clock upon the mantelpiece ticked wearily. All was somniferous.

Vera knew that Dad and Mum would sleep thus until it was time for tea. For herself, she could join them if she liked, sitting upon a kitchen chair until she too fell asleep; or she could go up and "rest" in the bedroom, or crouch breathlessly in the stuffy little parlour; but nowhere in that house could she be comfortable. Comfort there was unknown: hence Vera's constant dreams of luxury and escape. The rooms were so small that in some moods she was ready to scream from a too-excited consciousness of their cell-like walls, crushing her. The air was heavy. It was laden with all the staleness of a house where there was much cooking, where the furniture was elderly, and where every corner was regularly scrubbed with carbolic soap. Vera was enervated and irritable. If by moving about, or by playing upon the faint old piano in the parlour, she should awaken Dad, Dad would be sore and disagreeable for the rest of the day. If she stayed indoors doing nothing, or sewing, in such sweltering weather, she would have a headache, would feel ill-used. . . . Strange enough prospects, these, for a summer afternoon. Prospects, at least, not to be encouraged. With a grimace, Vera hurried silently back to the bedroom, chose a hat, put it on, came downstairs upon creaking tiptoe, and ran from the house. Out of doors she could breathe.

"It's awful!" thought Vera to herself. In the exclamation she summed up all the momentary feelings regarding the day, the house, the habits of her parents, the difficulty of being happy, and a thousand other things; but

she also, having committed herself to a judgment, began a series of thoughts which filled her with depression.

II

Without knowing in which direction she went, Vera followed the course they had all three taken upon the evening when they went to Hampstead. She did not hasten, because the heat was so great; but she walked briskly, in the effort to fight against her thoughts. She did not see the people she passed, or the ugly houses. She was thinking of all the things that made her feel a prisoner.

"If I could only . . ." A hundred possibilities occurred to Vera. She wanted to escape—to escape from home, from office-work, from days and days of doing the same tasks over and over again. She wanted sunshine, but freedom also to enjoy it. She wanted colour and magic and excitement; she wanted variety, strangeness, opportunity to indulge her wishes, power. She wanted to submit herself as a slave, and to rule as a conqueror. In imagination she lay relaxed upon the grass, worshipping the earth. A wave of devotion swept her; until she could have believed herself exalted by communion with the Holy Spirit. And so, with the stirring of a faint breeze which touched her face and hands, Vera came from among houses to open space. She looked over a distance that still seemed green and fertile. She looked up to a roaring expanse of cloud, and about her among the rich hues of the Heath; and in doing this she could feel that she was no longer pinioned. Vera began to breathe again. She was insensibly soothed and appeased.

But for a time only. Gradually, as if they throbbed with her heart, these wishes came back again. She saw

women who were better dressed than herself, and happy, laughing children; the very distances which lay under her eye revived the longing for freedom. Instead of freedom Vera had her little home, her daily work. She never had money to spend, rarely fresh clothes to wear; there were no compensations at all in her life, she felt. Everything was aimless repetition. Why? What was the good of it? Who was the better for it? She was useless, a drudge, unhappy . . .

A tear came into Vera's eye. She blinked it fiercely away. Another came, and still she would not succumb. If Anne were to see her cry, Anne would despise her. Anne thought crying was weak and wrong. Anne did not cry, herself, because she never had thoughts that made her want to cry. Anne was content. Anne didn't understand. She was unfeeling—yes, unfeeling. She had her own pleasures, that kept her cheerful and busy. Vera had no such pleasures. Anne, who was always so self-sufficient, in any emergency still had herself; Vera, without that self-sufficiency, in every emergency had nobody. Fortunate Anne! Unfortunate Vera!

But then Anne also had Mortimer. Had she?

III

The Heath was still very green; the trees were green. Sounds carried. Vera could hear voices from quite a long way away, and when people near her spoke she could understand perfectly what they said to each other. There was a faint wind upon the Heath, although the sun was still hidden by a mist of cloud. A mist was also before Vera's eyes for an instant. But as she ran down a short slope and was under the shade of some densely foliaged trees she felt better. She even felt impatient with herself for her recent discontents.

"Good gracious!" cried Vera, shaking herself in spirit. "I'm grizzling—grizzle, grizzle all the time. What's come to me? I used not to be like this. I used to be happy. What's the cause of it? Is it that I'm growing up? Growing pains?"

Suddenly, for the first time, Vera admitted the truth to herself. She had shirked it until this moment; but from now she could shirk it no longer. The jealousy she had felt of Anne, the melancholy of her thoughts, her impatience, this strange melting rapture and dismay, were all a part—not of any general discontent, but of the extraordinary *malaise* which had overtaken her. She was not ill, or tired, or shackled, as she had imagined. None of these three things. She was in love with Mortimer. She had known it, and had refused to admit the knowledge to her heart. She knew that all her dreams of life and splendour would be as nothing at all if she could but feel that Mortimer loved her in return.

A very soft, exulting smile came into Vera's eyes. She seemed to feel her heart swelling within her breast. She had a sense of growth, was absorbed in a vision of incalculable beauty and love and understanding. There, hidden in the shadow of the trees, screened from all, she stood with this revelation filling her senses. Slowly her eyes closed. She could see Mortimer, could hear his voice. She was entranced. And as if in sympathy with her the sun broke through the clouds, sending great shafts of golden light down to the earth, and making all that beautiful greenness superb under Vera's eyes. Happiness flooded her spirit.

She was still standing, quite simply, with her eyes raised and her hands at her sides, when, in the sunlight beyond the trees, she caught sight of Mortimer. He was advancing slowly in the direction of the little wood, his head bent as if in thought. He had not seen Vera.

IV

As they met, a shadow crossed Mortimer's face—whether of surprise or pleasure or dismay Vera's first startled glance could not discern. Thereafter, with her heart throbbing, she could think of nothing but the need of concealing her own emotion. She must be quite calm, she told herself—quite calm, with her heart beating fast and the blood racing to her cheeks; quite calm—though her hands trembled and her breathing was in time with her pulse. To be calm, to be still—such was the burden of her prayer.

Mortimer, as if embarrassed, took her hand, which, as he relinquished it, fell again to her side. The action startled Vera. Why did he take her hand? Was she then a stranger? His manner was constrained. Her mounting spirit was chilled. They met so usually without formal greeting that such silence, such nearness to a frown, wounded her deeply. What did it mean? Shyness, embarrassment such as her own? Why? Distaste? The lightning quickness of her sensitive doubts was a distress the more. Beyond the merest greeting, Mortimer had not spoken. He had not smiled. She longed to turn away, pride rising from that first bewilderment. She could not go; she could not now leave him; she must admit no betraying sign of hurt or fear. To cover her own chagrin, and to make speech between them, Vera said something breathlessly of her surprise at the encounter. The speech was a mistake, as she immediately knew; for he, coldly and teasingly, as it seemed to her eager heart, rallied her upon the surprise. There was terrible dissonance between them. Mortimer had always at command a style that mocked at and repressed the eagerness of others. He was aloof now, and unreadable to Vera; so cold as to be beyond her reach. Again she was flooded

by that sense of dejection, of proud shame, which the faintest chill of manner had power to evoke.

"Did you think you would see somebody else?" he asked, with a gleam in his eye. "Somebody finer than myself?"

"Indeed, no!" Vera averted her glance, lest he should read in it the uncontrollable love of her heart. "I thought I should see nobody at all. Mortimer!"

They stood together in the wood; and as Vera saw Mortimer so close to her, slim and white and graceful, with his head slightly raised and a faint smile upon his lips, she caught her breath. Her throat was parched with sudden longing. She could not speak, for joy at seeing him. She wished that Mortimer still held her hands in both of his, so that she might bring his hands gently to her cheek, her lips. Thus she loved him. Only thus could she display the submission of her spirit. To her sorrowful face, as if in answer to his expression, there came the faintest of smiles; but she read more deeply, and knew that Mortimer was not smiling. There was no love in his eyes, but a darkness. Vera trembled. She was powerless. Her head drooped; her heart sank lower.

V

"I must go on," she said at last, in a very low voice.

"Where are you going?" asked Mortimer, quickly.

"Nowhere. Anywhere," Vera might have answered; but she had not the courage to do so. She had become suddenly listless, and as if indifferent to him.

"I'm going to the top of Parliament Hill," said she, in a voice that she did not recognise as her own, "to see if there's any breeze there."

"There isn't," Mortimer answered. "I've just come from Parliament Hill."

"Perhaps there is now." Vera had the courage, at least, to smile as she spoke.

"There isn't," he repeated, ruffled, and frowning like a schoolboy.

"I shall go and see."

She would have left him if Mortimer had not caught her arm.

"Vera!" he cried. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"You go wherever you were going." There was a trembling note in her voice, but she was determined. "I haven't asked you to come with me."

"How obstinate you are!" sighed Mortimer, impatiently. His fingers were still upon her arm, but they slipped off as she moved. He was allowing her to go. He did not love her or wish to be with her. He was bent only upon his own will. She could not hold him, then. It was final. The realisation was terrible to Vera. She was overwhelmed by it.

"I'm not obstinate at all," she breathed. "Come with me."

"Come with you!" exclaimed Mortimer, as if incredulous. "Certainly not."

"Then *who's* obstinate?" Her face was frozen; her head ached.

"You can come with me," said Mortimer. "We'll go into the gardens up here and have some tea."

"With all the trippers? No, thank you."

"It's too early for them."

"It's too early for us, too."

Mortimer, as if exasperated, shrugged. There was arrogance in his whole pose. She had again that strange physical sense of his close, secret, voluptuous refinement. His whiteness, the gleam of his eye, the grace of his body, all alike were a spell to her.

"It will be cooler there," Mortimer urged, while she

was yet swayed by the vehemence of her feeling. Vera hesitated again. It would be sweet to submit. "Vera!" She loved to hear him speak her name. It was beautiful. He had a gentleness which enraptured her. Yet she had been so wounded that her truest impulse was to leave him.

And as Vera hesitated, Mortimer half turned away, teasing her, daring her to refuse. And, for all his teasing, he had an air of irritation, of disquiet and confusion. His expression was odd, unkind. He was ruffled and inconsiderate. He seemed to glance away from her, almost with aversion. Vera shrank from this scene. She longed to leave him; yet she stayed. Better to go, whatever the pain she might afterwards feel! She was yielding. Her wavering—the pulling between wish and desire—must have been apparent, for Mortimer's smile became fixed. She saw the gleam of triumph.

"No!" cried Vera.

But almost as she said "No" she was walking with him, dissatisfied, not happy, stricken with doubt that was torture. She looked aside at Mortimer, whose face was again serious. It was now too late to turn back.

VI

The battered green table of iron at which they sat was directly under a sycamore tree thick with foliage. It was further shaded by a high wall. But the shade could not make the tea garden cool. All it did was to enclose yet more surely the moist and sultry atmosphere, and to make it the more breathless. In the middle of the garden stood the broken statue of a naked female figure with her head lowered and her hands coyly disposed across her body. Visitors had for many years written their names and carved their initials upon the figure, which

was dirty and repulsive. All about Vera and Mortimer the grass had been so trodden that the ground in many places was bare. Such flowers as were in the garden were deformed, and feebly drooping. The scene was so un-garden-like that Vera's heart sank lower and lower. It did not need the coarse thick cups and saucers with which they were served, the common spoons, the ugly glazed teapot with a false spout of indiarubber, and the crumbling, dry, disgusting cake, to complete her dejection.

She sat opposite to Mortimer with tears behind her eyes. The heat in the garden was pitiless. It was close and suffocating there. Everything within sight was shabby and unkempt. Old iron tables, eaten with rust; iron chairs in like condition; the statue; the grass and flowers—all alike were uncared for. Even the horror she felt had no vigour, but was crushed and miserable. She could not protest; could only sit desolate and forlorn, with the wretched surroundings pressing her into despair. But if Mortimer could have understood her mute glance of appeal he would immediately have taken Vera from this place. Upon another day she would have begged him to do so, with fever born of her instinctive repugnance; but to-day she could not speak.

Mortimer was equally distrait. Every now and then, resting his chin upon his hands, he would seem to be about to speak. His eyes would meet Vera's eyes, would remain for an instant at gaze, as if he were displeased and dissatisfied. Something of imperiousness showed upon his mouth, and the corners of his lips sank like those of a disappointed child. Still Mortimer was unsmiling. Once she thought she perceived the slightest flush in his cheeks, but it faded even as she wondered, and she could not be sure that she had seen aright.

At last, painfully, Vera forced herself to break the silence. It did not matter what she said, so long as it

checked this unbearable discomfort. Nevertheless, her mind flew to one person, to one subject.

"Anne's gone to the theatre," she said, dully.

"I know," answered Mortimer. His lips parted for some comment, but instead of speaking he stared down at the table.

This time Vera was sure that colour had risen to his delicate cheeks. Her heart was like water.

"You've seen her, then?" she asked.

"I knew she was going."

"With a girl from the office."

"Yes."

"I shouldn't like to be crowded in a hot theatre on a day like this," Vera persisted, watching him.

"No," said Mortimer. After a pause, as if he were rousing himself to talk as she had done, he added: "I don't like going to the theatre in any case."

"Don't you?" Vera hesitated. "Why not?" While they were talking, she felt less unhappy. If she could but induce him to talk she could listen to his voice; her eyes would be less heavily burdened with tears and her heart with sorrow.

Mortimer shrugged again at the question. The smile which was no smile, which she had seen earlier, again crossed his face.

"It's such a bore," he said, indifferently.

"Don't you like to see life made clear?" asked Vera.

"Is it made clear?" demanded Mortimer, with impatience. "I don't think it is."

"Sometimes, I think it is."

"The plays are about stupid things, and the people in them do just as they're made to do. They're awfully unnatural. They're awfully crude."

"But people—real people—*are* crude," objected Vera. She searched his face with anxiety, longing eagerly for a

glance that should be kind and loving; and she found none. A few moments more, and all her self-control must desert her. As if desperately, she had opposed him.

"Perhaps you're right." Mortimer frowned. "Then I don't want to see them in action."

"Do you want only to be yourself?" asked Vera.

Mortimer shook his head. He did not even look at her, though her eyes besought him to do so.

"Not at all," he said, abruptly.

"What then?" Vera spoke very gently, and her voice was like a sigh.

"I don't know what I want," admitted Mortimer. "Who does?"

Again Vera sighed.

"No," she said, almost in a whisper. "No, I suppose not."

VII

Their tea and cake were hardly tasted. They continued to sit at the little iron table, and gradually other people, in twos and threes, began to come into the garden. All the newcomers stared at Vera and Mortimer, who had the shadiest place in the garden; and it was clear that one or two of the strangers made some comment to their friends. Mortimer could not see them, because his back was turned; but even if he had been aware of the strangers he would not have regarded their behaviour. Vera saw everything. She saw each group of people arrive, stand hesitating, and then wander towards a table; saw middle-aged women look at the spoons, and young women, proud of being able to pour out tea for their lovers, assuming unwonted airs of daintiness at the task. Talk began all around her, and as the groups became more numerous there was quite a babble in the garden.

Even Mortimer jerked his head over his shoulder to contemplate for an instant this array of tea-drinkers.

"Good Lord!" he muttered to himself.

The sun came out again, and the light frocks of the girls made the garden brighter than it had been. And with the sun came a faint, very fluttering and hesitant breeze, which made all those in the garden raise their heads. Vera noticed how flushed some of the women were, and how the younger ones re-powdered their noses. Some of them surreptitiously wriggled their shoulders, or plucked a little at the fronts of their silk or cotton jumpers, very honestly, perhaps, but to Vera's eye with horrible ill-taste.

In looking at these girls, who were all looking hard at herself and Mortimer, Vera was able to recover some portion of the self-control which had been slipping. She saw them with the eye and the superficial judgment only; her real thoughts—those thoughts which made her feel sick with distress and anxiety—were in no way affected by them, but were momentarily distracted. And in that instant of restoration she turned to Mortimer.

"We'd better go, now," she said quickly. "I must go home."

Even to herself, the voice which spoke these words sounded cold. It must have struck Mortimer in the same way, for he started. A third time it seemed that he flushed.

"Go?" he said, in a surprised tone. "Why?" Then: "There's no hurry, is there?" And, as Vera did not reply, he added, rallyingly: "We can go to Parliament Hill now, you know. You wanted to go there, didn't you?"

"I must go home," said Vera, trembling, but in the same frozen voice.

He was playing now, throwing blame for the after-

noon's failure upon her, and pretending that he had been agreeable and at customary ease during the whole of their meeting. Bitterness for the first time crept into her heart, and anger. She was resolute.

Mortimer gave one quick look at her. It was extraordinarily piercing, as though his eyes were suddenly alive. His face was alert. He seemed about to speak, and his lips parted. But Vera's head was up and her cheeks were marble. For that instant she was invulnerable. Her whole body was rigid. She saw the light in Mortimer's face die down, and again the chill mask that had been there all the time they had been together. He said nothing, but in silence, as if amused at her manner, signalled to the waitress. While she delayed, they sat without speaking, and at last moved to the entrance together.

"I shall go back to Parliament Hill," said Mortimer, once they were out again in the street.

"And I shall go home," replied Vera. They did not look at each other.

For an instant she might have given way. But Mortimer mocked her in a glance, mocked her by seeming to expect another victory, mocked her as he had mocked her before. It was too much; the price of surrender was too great. With her head still high, Vera left him, while Mortimer, raising his hat, turned in the opposite direction. Even his lips had gone white.

CHAPTER VI: TEA

I

ALL at home was frowsy and frowsty. The warmth of the house greeted Vera as soon as she opened the front door. Without, the heat was moist and full of lassitude; within it was dry and close, smelling of all those cramped comforts and cleanlinesses which for Mum made up the significance of Home. Mum and Dad were awake; and as Vera entered the kitchen Dad was stooping to pick up his newspaper, a look of sleepy dignity upon his ponderous face. Mum at the same instant was moving slowly and stiffly, as if her bones ached, between the kitchen cupboard and the table. She carried in her hands the sugar basin and the tea caddy. The coarse white cloth again rigidly covered the table, and upon it teacups and plates were set out. In the middle of the table was a big new currant cake, while flanking it were too large plates of tarts and scones. Saturday's tea lay before Vera.

"Oh, there you are!" cried Mum, cheerfully, at Vera's appearance. "Been out?"

She lowered her head and looked at Vera over the top of her glasses, and for the first time since the end of her nap became sprightly.

"Yes; it's horrible."

"Mm. Yes. Pity you went out. It's bad enough indoors, where there's a draught. I expect you're ready for your tea, aren't you?"

Vera shook her head decidedly.

"I don't want any."

"What!" It was not Mum who exclaimed, although Mum's face expressed just such a cry of amazement. The word had come from Dad, who cast aside his magnifying glass with a fine gesture and a gaze of arch grimness. He reached out his hand towards Vera, meaning her to advance and stand within the circle of his capacious arm. Vera shrank away, ignoring the arm. She preferred to remain with her head higher than the low level of clear daylight allowed by the next-door fence. "Here, you're not well," said Dad. "Hear that, Mum?" He addressed himself to them both in a raucous voice so vibrant that it sent tingles down Vera's spine.

"I've got a headache," faltered Vera. The bristling stiffness of Dad's moustache was still a menace. She feared he would call upon her to give her old Dad a kiss.

"Tea's just the thing to cure it!" cried Mum, plaintively. "The best possible thing. Come along, Vera; there's a good girl."

It was too much. Their persistency; their habit of regarding her as a child. . . .

"I'm *not* a good girl!" suddenly protested Vera, beginning violently to tremble. And then, warmly, she went on, her voice choking: "I can't understand why everybody treats me as a baby!"

As soon as she had spoken, she was ashamed of the outburst. But she saw Dad and Mum exchange a solemn glance, with raised, questioning eyebrows; and that made her almost frantic. There was a brief silence.

"It's the heat, Mum," explained Dad at last, majestically. Mum looked a little doubtful. Vera knew that Mum's eyes—this time through the spectacles, and not over them—had given one sufficient glance. The little figure of Mum, and her smooth, mild old face, were no sign at all of what went on within her mind; and the knowledge of this made Vera blanch.

"Well, it's just as you like, dear," said Mum, very gently. "Don't have it if you don't fancy it. But Dad and me's going to have ours now, aren't we, Dad?"

"I know." Vera was instantly penitent. "I'm sorry. I don't feel very well. It *is* the heat. I think I'll go up and lie down."

"Have a cup of tea first," coaxed Mum, much concerned. "I hope you're not going to be ill. Let's see your tongue." She eyed the red tongue with a regretful expression.

Vera would have escaped if she could; but escape was impossible. While she wavered between tea and bed, flight and endurance, there was another sound. The front door was sharply closed. And both Dad and Mum became still more animated, as if they were children expectant of a treat.

"There's Anne!" they said, simultaneously.

Mum flew out into the scullery with the teapot, and came back to survey the tea-table, the recent concern for Vera's headache and Vera's goodness for a time forgotten. Dad pulled at his moustache, jerked down his waistcoat back and front, and sat upright in his chair. Vera looked at the two of them, such simpletons as they were, who had lived all their lives in mean comfort, and loved each other, who had loved their home and children, and fed the children and kept them clean and neat and modest, thinking that this, and this alone, was their duty and happiness; and a bitter smile rose to her lips from out of the soft bitterness of her heart. How little they knew of distress! How much—ah! how much she herself, in one short week, had already experienced. . . . Unconsciously, she turned away from them. A shudder shook her.

II

And then Anne came into the room, and all was light. She had washed the drowsiness of the matinée from her eyes, and she was glad to be at home. It almost seemed as though Anne did not notice the heat or the frowsy frowstiness of the house, or Dad's shirtsleeves or Mum's finger nails. Anne was so smiling, and quick, and grave, that she was a very nice person to have at home. Even Vera was thankful she had come. Vera followed Anne's movements, dark-eyed. It was no wonder Mortimer preferred Anne, said her heart. Did he so prefer Anne? Who could question it? Ah, but—— She checked herself, lest she should groan aloud.

"What did you see?" demanded Mum. "Wait a bit while I make the tea."

Anne said drily:

"Just like Mum. Asks a question, and runs off before you can answer it."

"I can't hear!" protested Mum, from the scullery.

"It's—all—right,—Mum!" Anne raised her voice.

Back ran Mum, with the teapot and a hot water jug.

"Now!" she said, in a tone of expectancy.

Even Vera laughed a little at the scene. It was so ridiculous, and Anne's look so droll.

"Well, we saw the worst play that ever was written," said Anne.

"Hm. That's bad, for a start!" ejaculated Dad.

"It was *wretched!*" pursued Anne, with relish.

"Did you come out?"

"Yes, but what *was* it?"

There were two questions for Anne to answer, one from Vera, and the other from Mum. Anne ignored Mum's demand, saying:

"Did we come out! The idea! No; we stayed to see what happened. It was about a married woman, who found her husband was in love with somebody else, and went off with another man, though she loved her husband like anything."

"Well! What an idea!" cried Mum. They all looked at each other.

"It wasn't only the idea, though I thought that was silly enough——"

"Didn't she try to get her husband back?" demanded Vera.

"Bless you, she *had* tried. She'd cried——"

"Ah, *that* wouldn't do it," said Dad, painstakingly.

"Be quiet, Dad; you've never known anything about it. *She*'d cried and *he*'d cried. And still he preferred the other woman."

"It's love," said Dad.

"Be quiet, Dad!" feverishly cried Vera. It was sacrilege for Dad to speak of love.

"Here——" began Dad.

They rushed him out of his protest.

"And—I don't know if you've noticed how, if anything like that is going on—in a play,—there's always somebody else—just waiting."

"Not in real life," breathed Vera.

"In a play," confirmed Anne. "Now, in the old days it was always the *man* who was chivalrous. Now it's the woman——"

"Since they had the vote," explained Dad.

"Be quiet, Dad; you're vulgar. Well, and so that's the play. The man was *awfully* weak; and the woman kissed him on the brow, and you heard her drive off in the motor with the other man."

"It's not moral." Mum was perturbed at this *dénouement.* "Tut-tut."

"*He* must have been a sneak—the other man," cried Vera, indignantly.

"No. He was a white man—that's what everybody called him in the play. I think I should hate a white man if I met him."

"Well, what does it mean?" demanded Dad. "I'm not black."

"No, you're silly," Anne assured him. "A white man is a very greasy somebody who does good deeds in the limelight. What *we* call a cad. It's a *horrible* term."

Vera nodded.

"It sounds beastly," she murmured, half to herself.

"I don't know that I like the idea of your going to a play like that," said Mum, in a brooding way.

"Kitty Rogers loved it."

"She's an idiot," objected Vera, swiftly.

"She's sentimental, certainly. I think she likes to think of herself as very self-sacrificing. I mean, I think she likes to imagine herself doing what the woman in the play did."

"She wouldn't!" fiercely cried Vera.

"No. That's what sentimentality is. It's taking credit to yourself for the good deeds of others."

"Here, what's that?" asked Dad. "I didn't get that."

"I don't like it," continued Mum, thinking about the play. "It puts such wrong ideas into girls' heads."

"What ideas?" proudly demanded Vera, offended because she thought some slight to herself was intended.

"Well, you . . . your saying before tea that you weren't a good girl . . ." stumbled Mum. "That's one sort of thing. . . . I mean, the sort of thing that I mean."

So that had stayed in her mind! Vera started, flushing deeply; and sat quite silent at the table, while they all seemed to accuse her with their scrutiny. What had

Mum thought she had meant? Of course, she wasn't a *bad* girl—only an unhappy one; and Anne thought there were no bad people, but only unhappy ones and ones that were made brazen by the unkindness of others.

"Has she been saying that?" asked Anne. "Oh, you've been worrying her, Mum." Anne turned reproachfully upon her mother.

"I haven't!" protested Mum. "She said it herself."

"Well, it isn't true," said Anne. "And you needn't worry about it—any of you."

With that she looked firmly at both her mother and her father, and the eyes of both fell. It seemed to Vera that they sighed with relief. A sigh of relief rose to her own lips. She sent a wordless message of thanks to Anne.

III

As if deliberately, Anne went back to Kitty Rogers and the play.

"Kitty blew her nose quite a lot at the end," she said.

"I expect you did, too, if the truth's known," retorted Dad, who had been called silly.

Anne gave him a withering glance.

"I didn't," she said. "It's horrid of you to suggest such a thing."

"Any news on the bills?" he asked, to placate her; but also to satisfy his incessant craving for news.

"They've all got something different, so I suppose there isn't any *real* news," said Anne. "All 'strange story,' 'somebody's warning,' and so on."

"Hm," said Dad, nodding his head contemptuously. He picked up his half-read morning newspaper, and began to look through it.

"More tea, Dad?" Mum took the cup which he mutely

passed. As she did so, Vera knew that Anne was taking an anxious peep at her. She kept her head bent, so as to give away as little as possible, but without much hope of deceiving Anne. There was a silence. Dad uttered a short growl as he read what a socialist had said in the North of England.

"Grrr," he said, as if to himself. "Stupid talk."

They all knew what he must have read, and giggled quietly among themselves.

"Who's coming shopping with me?" demanded Mum.

Without a moment's hesitation, Anne replied:

"All of us."

And with that she rose from the table, and Vera rose, and Dad took his cup of tea to the big yellow armchair by the fireplace. The table was cleared, the dishes were washed, and the two girls raced upstairs for their hats. When they were in the bedroom, Anne closed the door. Vera had by this time gone to the cupboard which they both used as a wardrobe; but Anne followed her there. There was a funny faint savour of fur and cloth in the wardrobe, for neither Anne nor Vera used scent of any kind; and Vera never forgot that this odour of fur and cloth was in her nostrils when Anne spoke to her at this time.

"Vera, did you really say that to mother?" Anne asked.

"She was treating me as if I was a baby," whispered Vera. "She was telling me to do something—'there's a good girl';—and I said I wasn't one."

"You shouldn't say a thing like that to her. It makes her miserable. It does, really. She thinks it means something more than it does mean."

"What does she think it means?" asked Vera.

"Horrid things."

"I *am* horrid."

"*You* mean selfish, unkind, and of course you aren't

either; she thinks you mean commoner things—nasty things like meeting a man secretly . . ."

"O-oh!"

"She's very fond of us, and anxious about us."

Vera knew that Anne had misunderstood her exclamation. Anne had supposed it to be one of indignation. In reality it had been a cry of torture, because Vera had kept secret her meeting with Mortimer. She was thankful that the gloom of the cupboard hid her hot cheeks.

"I *know* she's fond of us!" cried Vera, impatiently. "But she doesn't treat you as a child. She does me. I'm not a child."

"I know you're not. But you're younger than I am."

"Eleven months."

"In other ways."

Vera stared at Anne. She tried to understand what Anne meant.

"We're different," she said, at length. "That's all it is."

"Also, I'm not so impulsive as you are."

"No, you're not," agreed Vera. But she could not prevent her lip from curling slightly in a nervous attempt to keep from smiling and crying. Such close talk between them was rare; and it made her self-conscious. It was strange to hear Anne speaking like this, and to know that Anne must have thought from her own standpoint about the difference between them. "But that's not to say——" She checked herself.

"Well, I *seem* older—to Mum," suggested Anne. There was just a hint of mischief in her tone, as if she were amused, as if her sympathy—real indeed—was tinged with loving laughter.

"You're being tactful!" cried Vera. "You see, *you're* treating me as a child, too."

"Am I?"

Vera could now tell with certainty from Anne's tone that Anne was trying not to laugh. It was galling. It was unbearable!

"There you are!" she exclaimed, furiously. "You see you're doing it."

"The truth is, you can't stand being laughed at, Vera," said Anne, very candidly. "I think that's it."

"Nor could you!" retorted Vera. "Only nobody *does* laugh at you."

She knew that Anne nodded. She heard the faintest rustle.

"I don't laugh at you unkindly," Anne said.

"You do!" protested Vera.

"No. I love you so much that I laugh at you. You don't see that the reason everybody does love you is that you seem to be a baby—a nice—ever-so-nice baby;—and they just can't help it."

The words came to Vera as a thunder-clap.

"Everybody!" she exclaimed.

"Ourselves and Mortimer, then."

"Mortimer!" It was a breath. There was no reply from Anne. She was moving away from the cupboard. Vera remained standing within it. The name had given her so great a shock that she was trembling, even to her lips. Mortimer . . . "Oh," said Vera, when she had recovered her voice.

"Is it so strange?" asked Anne.

Anne was standing before the mirror, putting on her hat. Vera, although she could not herself be seen, could see Anne. There was upon Anne's face no smile. She was very serious indeed. Vera wondered at the sudden change in Anne's tone, and at the seriousness of the expression round Anne's lips. Anne's eyes she could not see.

CHAPTER VII: THOUGHTS

I

DAD'S passion was insurance. Where other men bet or gamble, he insured. Insurance was his flat-racing, his steeple-chasing, his bridge, his football-coupons, his *roulette,* his *trente-et-quarante,* his pool, his money-market, his flutter, his stocks and shares, deals, bulling, bearing, and allotments. In fact it was Dad's great gamble, the whole of his extra-domestic world. Without his insurance, there would have been no Dad, for insurance had given Dad an interest in life and had dominated his mind for thirty-five years.

Dad was a compositor upon a London daily newspaper, and one of the reasons for his use of a magnifying glass in reading through the whole of any paper was that by its aid he could discover all the misprints by which the paper was disfigured. In reality, Dad saw better without the magnifying glass than with it, as do all who use magnifying glasses; but it is true that his sight was beginning to fail slightly, so that spectacles were becoming inevitable. In his earliest days, and before he was married, Dad had been seized by the fever of life insurance. He had taken out a policy which promised him large payments at the ages of forty-five, fifty-five, and sixty-five. Although Dad was now just fifty-five, neither of the two sums already due to him had been claimed, and so the amounts had accumulated, with interest. Dad was biding his time. His plans were laid. But not yet was he ready to relinquish his great sport.

Upon his marriage, Dad had increased the amounts as-

sured, and had taken out similar policies for his wife. The sums to which she had been entitled were also unclaimed. Dad juggled in his mind with the grand totals. Their computation was his secret joy. He constantly worked out afresh, upon the backs of envelopes, and with the triumph of a miser, the details of his insurances; and always he did this with calm befitting the activity of a master mind.

When the girls were born he had instantly taken out policies assuring their education, a payment to each of them at the age of twenty-five, another payment at forty, and an ultimate payment at fifty. He had bought (through a building society, so that the purchase had seemed like a form of insurance), and he had fully insured, the little house in which they all lived. He was insured against fire, theft, burglary, accidents (fatal and otherwise), accidents to servants and friends, claims for compensation, and every other calamity the possibility of which he had been able reasonably to fear. A great part of his income went in building this bulwark against disaster. At the age of sixty, when he intended to retire, Dad would be in possession of a small fortune. It was his ideal. It was to his retirement that he looked forward with a kind of warm, thrift-filled expectation. But he had sacrificed much, and in particular many pleasures, during thirty-five years. His whole life had been spent—not so much in amassing wealth as in providing for rainy weather in his old age; and it was a tragic circumstance that by handing himself over to two ideals—typographical accuracy and complete insurance—Dad had ruined his own excellent nature. He had become as dull and pompous as his gigantically florid moustache, which was feared by Anne and Vera as nothing else about Dad was or could be feared.

When the girls first went out to business Dad handed

over to each of them the task of paying her own insurance premiums; but in doing this he took no risks of any act of defiance or forgetfulness such as Anne or Vera might have committed. His method was to exact each week from his daughters the amounts due in respect of premiums. Dad, however solemn his daughters might find him, was no fool. He was a model of integrity, but models of integrity are not without knowledge of human nature. Dad had rebuffed temptation in his own youth, but he had no confidence that Anne and Vera would bear the strain of similar temptation. They were not upheld, as he had been, by a passion. They were both opportunists. Dad believed himself to be a philosopher.

Being so protected, as he was, and having his family so protected, Dad lived a calm and untroubled life. He had never been unemployed. If he had been unemployed his insurances (which provided amply for such emergencies) would have brought about a positive increase in Dad's weekly revenue. He did not know what hunger was. He was in politics a Conservative, and, as one might expect, a lover of stability. In his judgment the world must be kept stable for stable people by stable government. How else could investments—the investments of the stable working-man—enjoy security? To his fellow-compositors Dad preached thrift, insurance, stability; but as he worked upon a Radical paper, and as his fellow-compositors preferred a merry life to a fully-covered one, Dad was a lonely man. He said very little at any time, but thought much. He did not think deeply, but he thought a great deal, and it was only in his own home that Dad's views aroused mirth and ridicule and were generally disregarded.

Anne and Vera, having had their schooling assured, were very much better educated than their mother and father had ever been. They had received a considerable

amount of teaching. What defects of knowledge they had were due purely to waywardness or inattention during class. As a consequence, although their opportunities had been the same, Anne was better educated than Vera. Vera had dreamed her days away, and as she was unusually quick-tempered, volatile, and spasmodic, she had learned some things very easily and others not at all. She had loved certain subjects, and had loved certain people; but to the major part of the teaching, and to the larger number of her fellow-students, she had been indifferent. She had made friends quickly, had felt that she felt deeply, but had either tired her friends or tired of them within a short time, and had felt other, newer, things with a fresh deepness that superseded the old emotion. Nevertheless, she had never been unpopular; and at the time of our story she retained a number of friendships of varying warmth, and was welcome in perhaps a dozen homes besides her own.

What friends Anne retained, Vera never knew. Several of them came to the house, but most of them did not. Anne met them at lunch, and corresponded with them, but did not give up her life to them. They were outside the main interests of her days, and nothing could alter their position. She had friends and friends, but no exacting friends. Most of those who loved her were content; but not all of them. Vera remembered having seen one girl who attached herself to Anne and wrote tumultuously affectionate letters, who came weeping one day to the house because Anne did not return the affection in the same degree and did not write tumultuously affectionate replies to her letters; but Vera had herself so despised this girl that she fully sympathised with Anne's distaste and never once blamed Anne for it. She could not have borne such adoration. It was never once offered to her. It was silly as well as ugly. At the same time,

Vera had been struck unpleasantly by Anne's coldness. She saw that Anne did what she thought to be right, and that other people could not hope to make Anne change a course of action upon which she had decided. And this perception, while it forced Vera to respect Anne, did not make Anne the less mysterious to her. She herself was constantly changing a course of action, and the contrary habit was a bewilderment to her.

Vera felt that the trouble between herself and Anne arose from the fact that Anne was reserved, self-sufficient, cold, hard, self-controlled. . . . Whereas Vera was warm-hearted, loving, outspoken, impulsive, and dependent upon the love of others. Anne was unimaginative, stodgy, practical, capable, mischievous; she had a strong will and good brains, was pretty, slight, graceful. . . . Whereas Vera was fanciful, unpractical, quick, pretty (prettier, she meant, than Anne), had a good figure (a better figure, she meant, than Anne's), and was not at all mischievous, but rather serious. . . . Vera knew perfectly well which of the two she preferred to be. Anne was nice, was kind and loyal; and she had no doubt her advantages, her superiorities. Let her have them. It was better to be open-hearted than bafflingly immovable, as Anne was. It was better to be fanciful than to be self-controlled, better to be serious than to talk nonsense in season and out of it. What was coldness, what was self-sufficiency, what was mockery? Were these lovable qualities? Vera smiled drily to herself, and felt herself smiling drily.

There was in Vera's mind—for all these confident summaries and rhetorical questions—a slight dissatisfaction with every comparison which she made between herself and Anne. Deep in her heart she was not comfortable about her own superiority to Anne. She was sure of many things (painfully sure of her love for Anne; gladly

sure of Anne's love for herself), but she was not sure of this one question, which often recurred to her mind. Whenever she made the comparison Vera surreptitiously felt as though she were arguing with an invisible opponent.

II

It was not a pleasant sensation for Vera. She had first become aware of it when Mum treated her as a baby long after she had left school. In Vera's opinion one ceased to be a child when one left school. One was then, at least, a girl. Mum wanted her to be a baby still, although Mum was ready to treat Anne as grown up. It was ridiculous. It might be true that Mum loved her more indulgently than Anne. Vera did not want to be loved indulgently. She wanted to be treated as a responsible person, and Mum was always suggesting that she was not able to look after herself. It was exasperating! To do Anne justice, Anne did not as a rule patronise her. Anne was pretty good to her,—but then Anne had no reason to be anything else. Anne was her best friend. Yes, her best friend except in relation to Mortimer. . . .

Such thoughts as these were very much in Vera's mind one evening soon after the miserable Saturday when she had met Mortimer upon the Heath. She was upon her way home from the office, and the 'bus was swaying along the wide roads with a motion that helped her to think quietly. But indeed, she was thinking with but half her attention, because down below her thoughts Vera's heart was breaking. She could think as she had been doing, and could feel quite warmly about the state of things which her thoughts revealed; and yet in herself she knew that she was in fact indifferent to everything in

the world save one person. Mortimer she had not seen since that terrible afternoon. He had neither come to see them nor written. He had never before been so long away from the house. It was almost a fortnight since she had seen him.

Vera's heart sank. What this silence meant, she too well knew. Mortimer had guessed her love, and had chosen this way of showing that he did not love her in return. The truth was unmistakable. But then, if he kept away from Vera, he kept away also from Anne. Was that not so? And if Mortimer did not love Anne . . .

He would come back. It was a passing estrangement. It was nothing. His manner had been extraordinary, but men behaved strangely in so many circumstances . . .

Vera shook her head. Her lips were pressed tightly together. She did not really believe the thoughts that were passing thus argumentatively through her head. They were plausible thoughts, but she did not rely upon them. She relied upon her untaught sense; and this told her to abandon hope. It told her to abandon every description of hope. And then, lurking somewhere at the bottom of Vera's untaught sense, was imperishable expectancy. If Mortimer had behaved strangely to her he was not indifferent to her. Well?

And at this Vera rose to descend from the omnibus. She knew that one may ask one's heart a million questions and receive a million replies; but as to which reply is the truer she was as unable to be certain as any other person. Anne, of course, would have known; but Vera was not Anne. She was only Vera.

Only Vera! She permitted herself a faint smile at the jeer; but it was so faint that the smile seemed rather to emphasise the sadness and weariness of her expression.

III

She was home at last. How *brown* the house was! It was like mouldering chocolate. It was brown at the edge, like a withered flower. It was snuffy and stuffy. She ran up to the bedroom, and saw that Anne had been there before her; then down to the kitchen, to find Anne helping with the table and talking and making Mum laugh. Anne was wearing a new light green linen dress, and looked pretty and cool and happy. She looked as cool and happy as possible, and it was hard to believe that she had spent a trying day in the company of Mr. Sims. Yet such, to judge from the account she was giving Mum, had been the case. It was a day, apparently, to surpass any previous day in her experience of the vagaries of Mr. Sims.

Vera closed the door of the kitchen, went forward to the door of the scullery, and disposed herself to listen to the story. She leant against the scullery door-frame. She was for this reason quickly in Mum's way, and then in Anne's way, but she heard what there was to hear, and was kept in constant movement by the need to allow one or other of them to pass.

". . . I hated doing it," Anne was saying when Vera arrived; "but I couldn't very well refuse. She sounded very pathetic . . ."

"Who's 'she'?" asked Vera. Her eye wandered from Anne's face to her waist, from her shoulder to the hem of her skirt, remarking the fit of the cool green dress, and approving it.

"A girl Mr. Sims knows. She rang him up on the telephone to-day—it seems she wants him to lend her some money. He won't. He's got plenty, but he says he won't lend it."

"What did you have to do?"

"I had to tell her he wouldn't."

"How horrid!"

"And it was all the worse because he was standing three feet away, listening to what I said. I felt as if he was nudging me, and nodding his head, and showing his teeth."

Vera shuddered. She could picture the scene. Anne, Mr. Sims, the other girl at the other end of the telephone —the shock to the other girl, the burden to Anne, the unpleasantness of Mr. Sims. Mr. Sims very sleek and shiny, Anne flushed, the other girl perhaps almost crying. At any rate, disappointed.

"Did she sound nice?" she asked, interestedly. Anne's collar set beautifully, and the whole dress had a pleasant elegance.

"I think so." Anne hesitated. "It's difficult to tell on the telephone."

"I can always tell," asserted Vera.

Anne looked at her drolly, as if to herself she were saying: "Naturally." That, at least, was what Vera thought.

"I can't always," Anne admitted. "But the thing I was really worried about was Mr. Sims. He spoke so nastily to me about her. That's what I dislike about Mr. Sims. His opinions of women are so base. It's a strange thing that he should be so polite—almost obsequiously polite,—and at the same time so insulting. I think he despises everybody. He must be awfully conceited. The politeness is a veneer; and then you have this ugly contempt underneath."

Vera took several steps into the kitchen, moved to impatience by this fresh picture of the invisible Mr. Sims. She felt strong distaste for him.

"I think he sounds perfectly *horrible,* Anne!"

Anne shook her head, smiling.

"No," she objected. "He's not horrible—of course, he *is* horrible, I know;—but there's something I like about him. I'm beginning to like him."

"Anne!" Vera wheeled upon her. "Not to fall in love with him!"

She was so violently concerned that Anne burst out laughing.

"Well, perhaps not quite to fall in love with him," she said soberly. "And yet—you never know. I hated him at first, but he's really very human. He's sometimes very kind to me. I should think he was nice outside the office. At home, for instance. People are quite different—often —when they aren't thinking of work—and money. A good woman, Vera . . . I think she might work wonders."

Again Vera shuddered, although she knew that Anne was teasing her.

"If you were to marry him!" she exclaimed. "I'd never——" She had been going to say "forgive you," but she checked an extravagance. She knew that, whatever Anne did, she would always forgive her. So she ended her sentence quickly with the words: "believe you were really happy."

There was a short silence.

"Don't worry," replied Anne, in a low voice. "I'm not at all likely to marry Mr. Sims." She was very serious, for once, and for a moment only. Her look was quite grave. Then, as if she recovered herself, she added: "Something tells me it's unlikely."

And with that Vera saw her smile frankly, so that she forgot the seriousness of a moment before, and dismissed Mr. Sims altogether from her mind.

IV

Nevertheless Vera did not wholly obliterate Anne's seriousness from her memory. It made her think as she sat quietly after supper. Anne was going out to see Mabel Cutting, a girl who lived not far away, and as Vera did not like Mabel Cutting she preferred to stay at home. She had sewing to do; but, when Anne was gone, instead of sewing she sat thinking of Anne and Mr. Sims, Anne and Mortimer, Anne and herself. It was an absorbing subject to Vera. She could never come to the end of it.

And then she thought—what if Anne *did* marry somebody Vera did not like? What if she married unhappily? At the mere thought of this, Vera was impatient. Anne would not marry unhappily. Whomsoever she married she would rule, and so—however the husband behaved—she would be no more unhappy than if she were alone. It must be much more wretched to marry a man if you were dependent upon his love for your own self-confidence. Besides, Anne would not be brushed into marriage by any side wind. She would either be quite sure or she would stay unmarried. She was never a husband-seeker.

Still, supposing that were not so. Supposing Anne had a disappointment. Supposing she wanted very much to marry somebody and he preferred—say, another girl. What would Anne do? Some girls, when they were disappointed, married very quickly a man other than the man of their choice. Men did the same thing. If Anne had a disappointment, might she not marry Mr. Sims?

What had Anne meant by saying, "Something tells me it's unlikely"?

V

Mum had evidently been watching Vera as she dreamed thus, for she presently put out her hand and touched Vera's wrist.

"You don't feel ill, do you?" Mum asked, looking through her glasses. Her old brow was puckered with perplexity. Vera looked up to meet the loving gaze, and smiled to reassure Mum.

"No. I was just thinking about Anne," she answered.

Mum fidgeted a little upon her chair.

"Have you noticed anything about her?" she suddenly said.

"About Anne?" Vera was startled. She thought quickly. "What sort of thing?"

Mum instantly flew back into security.

"Nothing," she said, in her little mild voice.

"But what *sort* of thing, Mum?" Vera was quite wide awake, now. "Oh, Mum, you *are* tantalising! I wish you'd say what you mean." She bent forward, searching in memory for every recollection of Anne's moods, every faint hint that should explain Mum's question.

"I was only wondering," said Mum.

"What? Wondering *what?*"

"Well, if she was quite well. That's all."

"Do you think she's ill?"

Mum's tone changed. From concern she veered to warning.

"Now you're getting agitated, Vera; and you oughtn't to let yourself get agitated. You know what Dad's told you all your life. 'Keep calm,' he's said. You mustn't get agitated."

Vera calmed herself. She checked her excitement and sat quite still, looking steadfastly at Mum until she knew that every indication of fever had subsided.

"Now," she said, firmly. "What did you mean?"

"I only wondered if you'd noticed that Anne's not very happy," remarked Mum.

Not happy? Anne not happy? It seemed to Vera a ridiculous thought.

"Well!" she exclaimed, in marvel. "Of *course* she's happy! I don't know what on earth you mean!" And with that she looked across at Mum, who placidly took up her knitting and left Vera to digest their singular conversation as well as she could.

VI

In ten minutes, having been busy with this process of digestion, Vera found herself irked by the presence of Mum. It was very well for Mum to warn her against agitation, but Mum had introduced an agitating topic. Vera was much excited. She was also irritated with Mum for starting a stupid tale. She accordingly sprang impetuously up, to an accompaniment of raised eyebrows from Mum and a wild expostulation, and announced her intention of going out of doors for a few minutes and a few breaths of air.

"Don't be long, dear," begged Mum. She knitted on, but she did not look at her knitting. Instead, she looked closely at Vera. Vera, in her turn, kept an eye on Mum. A sudden thought occurred to her.

"D'you mind being left?" she asked.

"I'd rather you were in," retorted Mum, ambiguously.

And so Vera, incensed by Mum's evasiveness, hurried out of doors. She was by this time tremendously excited —far too much excited to remain indoors, within such narrow and obtrusive walls. Was Anne not happy? It was absurd. But if Anne was unhappy there must be a cause, and the cause must be removed. Anne had just

got to be happy. Vera's mind was in a jumble. She said to herself that it was ridiculous to suggest any such thing about Anne. Could one imagine Anne anything but happy? Nonsense! Other thoughts came. Anne might be unhappy, and still cheerful. Vera knew that cheerful people must have their sorrows. Otherwise there was no virtue in their cheerfulness. And Anne never showed her feelings. At least, she did not betray them. She thought they were her own business. Vera shook her head as she hurried along the street.

Dark clouds were gathering overhead. The sun was sinking, but not redly. There was a lurid glow in the west, and the menacing clouds above were here and there touched with yellow light. Storm looked to be near at hand. Yet the sky was not covered with cloud, and the sun's fierce light made grey paving stones and the surface of the streets shine with ghastly brightness. The effect was dazzling and oppressive. Vera found herself vaguely excited, as if the menace of the evening had secretly alarmed her. She moved more quickly, half-closing her eyes against the glare, and longing for the sun to go altogether, in order that she might be rid of this distracting light.

She did not think of her direction, but walked on bathed in the threatening, ugly brilliance, thinking only about Anne. She was quite lost in her thoughts, which were now less excited, but still impatient. Anne unhappy? Why, if she was unhappy she could not hope to escape Vera's observation of her unhappiness.

"Of course," said Vera, to herself, stopping sharply in the middle of a road, "I've been busy thinking about myself lately."

And before she had recovered from the effect of this shock, while she was walking along a quiet and sedate road, upon each side of which were respectable villa resi-

dences with slated roofs and front gardens not more than a yard deep, Vera received another shock. First of all she looked up and found that she was in the road in which Mabel Cutting lived; and then, with her heart frozen, she saw Anne some distance ahead, walking in the same direction as herself. She was almost at the Cuttings' door, walking very slowly, as if she purposed entering the gateway. And by Anne's side was Mortimer. The two were not arm-in-arm, but there was something so intimate in their carriage that horror drove the blood from Vera's cheeks. Without further thought she turned, almost running, until she was out of sight.

CHAPTER VIII: NEWS

I

IT was a week later. Vera was still living in a troubled dream, her heart heavy and her thoughts oppressive. She went to and from the office each day, and did her work there as if it was a part of her dream; she ate and tried to behave as if nothing marred the colour of her days. But she had no true life. She crept about at home, subdued and frightened, and at night, in bed, lay sighing until a kind of stupor stole over her languid senses and lulled her into forgetfulness.

Each morning as they arose she looked wonderingly at Anne, who seemed to be as absorbed in thought as she was herself. Anne, too, was silent. She had the appearance of being ill and tired, and she carried herself almost with an air of estrangement from Vera and her mother. Anne was unreadable. Vera watched her with eagerness, to learn nothing. All she could see was that Anne's eye was less bright, and her bearing less buoyant, than usual. When anybody spoke to Anne she was as gentle as ever, and Vera saw that she smiled as quickly; but she was different, and the smile was kinder, and less spontaneous. Dad was rarely at home to comment upon his family, for Dad rose later than the rest of them, and when he was there Anne was always cheerful; while if Mum felt anything about the two girls she kept her knowledge or her suppositions to herself. She glanced at Vera sometimes through her spectacles and sometimes over them, but at all times without remark.

So the days went by, in great heat, with lightning flash-

ing at night and thunder bludgeoning by day. Each hour seemed to Vera to hold a hundred weary hours, so heavy was her heart; and the hours of the night were the longest and most torturing of all. And when morning came, and she must step from bed to begin another of these endless rounds of endurance, Vera groaned despairingly. If only, having slept, she might sleep on, and never awaken!

The alternative to this strain was a sudden break with her present way of life. If she could only leave London, and go abroad! Begin again, throwing old sorrow behind her! That was Vera's next thought. She did not know how to do what she desired, how to begin, how, unknown to the others, to make inquiries which would offer her the means of escape. Ordinarily, she would have asked Anne's help; but this she could not now do. She could no longer trust Anne with her secrets. She never looked at Anne without thinking that perhaps Anne was but just come from Mortimer. She did not hate Anne, or fear her, or despise her. She did not hate anybody or anything. She was bewildered, as if she had been stunned.

II

And at the end of the week there was no difference in this situation. Anne was out nearly every evening, and Vera stayed at home. She would not have stayed if she had had anywhere to go; but she had nowhere to go. If she thought of any of her friends it was to shrink from each of them while her feelings were thus in suspense. She felt that she had friends but no friend. Anne had been her friend.

At last Sunday came, and in the afternoon Anne went out. She did not say where she was going; but Vera, watching her, knew she was to meet Mortimer. When

Anne had gone, Vera went up to the bedroom and sat down upon her own bed. In imagination she followed Anne's journey, saw the meeting with Mortimer. She imagined Anne and Mortimer sitting at tea. Stabbing memory of her own tea with Mortimer, the speechlessness of both of them, the stupid failure of the afternoon, brought tears to her eyes. She was ashamed and miserable.

She sat there for a long time, thinking; and so fell asleep, waking an hour afterwards with the knowledge that Dad and Mum also had slept and were now awake once more.

III

In the kitchen, at tea, Vera told them that she had slept; but she did this because Dad remarked upon her listlessness. He looked over his teacup at her, and she saw the enormous branches of his moustache spreading like a shadow over his cup. Dad said—

"Quiet, aren't you, Vera?"

"I'm not awake," she answered.

"Oh, dreaming," suggested Dad, sarcastically.

"I fell asleep. And I'm not dreaming at all." Vera repelled his facetiousness. She could not bear Dad's facetiousness. It was hob-nailed. "I never dream."

"Well, I don't know," said Dad, projecting his underlip and seizing the ends of his moustache with it. "Somehow I always had the idea that young girls dreamed a bit."

"Not nowadays," answered Vera, coldly.

"Hm. It's a pity." Dad was impervious to coldness. He sat at the table in his clean shirtsleeves, and Vera could hear his heavy breathing as he ate and drank. "Doesn't Anne dream?"

Always Anne! Always Anne! Vera felt a shiver of hysteria run through her.

"I don't know what Anne does," said she. "But it's the last thing I should think she did."

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Mum, smartly. "She's talking nonsense, Dad."

"I'm not, Mum. Dad means all the old silly rubbish about dreaming of knights and . . . and cavaliers waking you with a kiss. Women don't think of that now. They're ambitious. They think of more real things."

"Such as—what?" asked Dad. Mum merely grimaced.

"They don't think marriage is the last chapter."

Dad thought for a moment. Vera, impatiently restless, could almost see his thoughts revolving with the speed and cumbersomeness of a steam-roller. Dad's forehead was solid. He was *all* solid. She knew it was hopeless to argue with him, because he never understood the meaning of one's words, let alone his own exasperating slowness.

"Marriage isn't the last chapter, eh?" he rumbled. "Yes it is—of the first volume."

Vera gave a little exclamation at his persistence.

"You're old-fashioned, Dad. We don't have three-volume novels now."

"Yes, but we have sequels," retorted Dad, in an unanswerable manner. He turned upon his elbow. "Now, don't we, Mum?"

Mum looked rather bored. She did not care what either of them said, it appeared.

"I suppose so, Dad," she answered. "I never notice."

"Well, look at Mum here," cried Vera, in desperation. "Do you suppose she ever thought *you* were a knight?"

Dad brushed his moustache with some appreciation of its singularity.

"She might have done worse," he said, calmly.

"I didn't say that. I said she didn't dream about you."

Dad opened his mouth. His jaw moved slightly to one side as he rubbed his rich cheek with a stout left forefinger. It was a particularly knowing expression.

"Did you, Mum?" he archly asked, with a glance at Mum from under his brows.

"Yes, I did," agreed Mum, placidly. "I always thought you were a very fine man."

"A prince?" pressed Vera.

"Any way, quite the gentleman," stoutly responded Mum. "I used to think myself somebody when he called for me of a Sunday. We used to see the curtains move as we went along the road. At least, I used to—I don't know if Dad did."

"I did," modestly said Dad.

"Yes!" cried Vera. "But you're talking of respectable, humdrum marriage. I'm talking about *romance*."

"Oh, romance," repeated Dad. "Yes, but the knights —weren't *they* respectable?"

Vera laughed with a kind of scornful bitterness.

"Who ever heard of respectable knights!" she jeered.

"Well, we don't want any of the other kind hanging round after you, my dear," said Dad. "If you don't mind, I'll ask 'em a few questions first."

"As to whether they're fully insured, I suppose?"

Dad was too old a hand to be ruffled by Vera's gibe.

"Oh, a few other things," he said, slowly. "Whether they've got a knight's wages, and so on."

"I shouldn't let you."

Dad looked at Vera with a grave face. She looked back at him in defiance. And it seemed to Vera that she caught in Dad's eye an expression she did not expect to see there. She could almost have persuaded herself that one of Dad's eyelids moved while the other remained stationary.

IV

Thereafter, Dad took Vera to the pictures for an hour. They sat in uncomfortable seats, in the darkness, amid a bevy of lovers. It was appallingly hot in the picture house, and the pictures they saw were indescribably confused narrations of unlikely stories. Girls skipped about with impossible rapidity; close-ups showed the villians proving their villainy by refusing to meet the eyes of the audience; the heroes were, on the other hand, frank and solemn in their return of scrutiny. The constant switch from scene to scene first distracted Vera and then bored her. She wondered what Dad felt about the entertainment.

Dad sat perfectly upright in his seat. He was a tall bulky man, and those behind him were badly off. He stared straight at the pictures. He never ejaculated or commented, but continued to stare as though every picture was the same picture and as though he knew them all. When Vera at last, her head aching, plucked at his sleeve, he followed her without a word. They were immediately afterwards in the street.

"Phew," whistled Dad. "It was warm in there."

V

They went slowly home, and found Mum sitting in the kitchen darning stockings. As they came in, she looked up over an elaborate darn, and said in her mild old voice—

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Dad did," said Vera. Then, becoming aware of her ungraciousness, she added: "I did, too; only it gave me a headache."

"Some very strange doings in those pictures," said Dad.

They could not persuade him to say any more. It was his one comment.

"Why, you look quite white, child!" cried Mum, suddenly, throwing down her darning and coming to Vera's side.

Vera, who had been feeling more and more ill, gave a long, weary sigh.

"It's my head," she murmured, her voice almost inaudible. She was slowly fainting. The shadow about her grew thicker and thicker, as if a veil hid the others from her, and their voices were faint. "I shall be . . . better . . ."

Some movement she heard, and she felt Dad's arms about her, and knew that it was very sweet to be supported in such strong arms; and then she lost consciousness.

At awakening, Vera had no sense at all of what had happened. She was lying upon her own bed, and Mum was beside her, while Dad loomed behind Mum. She felt very sick and drowsy, as if she could do nothing but lie deeper and deeper into the pillow, wearily and hopelessly. And as she saw Mum's face, in which anxiety and placidity were curiously mingled, Vera was amused and pitying and full of regret. It seemed too bad that she should give them so much trouble, when all she wanted was rest and oblivion.

VI

Long afterwards, Vera found that Anne was in the room. Anne had not lighted the gas, but was undressing in the pearly darkness. She was moving very quietly, and it was the sense of her presence rather than any noise

which had aroused Vera. It was evidently quite late at night, for the sound of traffic in the distance was faint, and there were no lights in the houses to be seen from the bedroom window.

Vera watched Anne slip off her dress. She could follow all Anne's movements plainly in the clear light, but not her face, which was turned away. It was strange to lie there in peace, after having felt very ill, and to see Anne home at last from her evening with Mortimer. There was no doubt at all in Vera's mind. Anne had been with Mortimer. Vera wondered what Mortimer had said, and what Anne had said, and where they had been . . . Her brain was perfectly clear, but she felt unlike herself. She felt weak and exhausted, without the vitality needed for any concern with emotions. And as Anne began brushing her hair Vera saw how very slim and graceful she was, and how lightly she moved. She took pleasure in Anne's prettiness, because for the first time for many months she did not instinctively contrast it with her own.

Very gently Vera turned her head and moved her body.

"I'm awake," she whispered, almost relishing her own feebleness.

Anne turned at once, and came across to the side of Vera's bed. Her voice was as hushed as Vera's had been.

"Are you better?" she asked. "Poor old girl. I was so sorry."

"Yes." Again Vera moved voluptuously in comfort. "It was horrid."

"It must have been. Is your head better? Is there anything you want?"

"Yes, it's better. I don't want anything. Where did you go?"

Vera heard Anne's breath catch. She was sure of it. The darkness and the stillness seemed to pulse regularly, while Anne stood without moving. There was quite a long pause. It lasted until such time as the surprise of that sudden question had passed. At last—

"Oh," said Anne, in a low voice. "We went by train into the country." Almost naturally, she went on: "It was so lovely, Vera. We were able to walk a tremendous distance, up hill and down dale. I've brought some wonderful flowers. We saw all sorts of things I've never ——" She checked herself, as though some impulse had made this account seem false to herself. "I went with Mortimer," she said suddenly.

"I knew." Vera breathed the words. She did not look at Anne, but stared straight up to the vague shadow of the ceiling.

Anne seemed to hesitate. She stood quite still, as if she were looking down at Vera and pondering upon what she should next say. Vera knew that Anne must have been startled and yet not startled by her claim to have known about Mortimer, and she now for the first time tried to pierce the darkness and to understand the cause of Anne's hesitation.

Anne was so slim that in this faint light she was almost fairy-like, and Vera, half dreaming yet, heard her voice as if it came from a great distance.

"Did you know?" There was something in Anne's tone that seemed strange to Vera. She was speaking impetuously, as if she were excited. "Did you guess it? I mean, I didn't tell you, did I?"

"No." Vera's heart began to beat very fast indeed. She felt the blood rising to her face, burning her, burning her neck, suffocating her . . . "No. Of course . . ."

Again there was silence between them. It was un-

bearable pain to lie thus in suspense. If only Anne——

"Vera," said Anne, at last, in the same low tone which she had used throughout. "I haven't told Mum yet, but I want to tell you. Mortimer's asked me to marry him."

It had come. That which her heart had known was revealed. Unseen by Anne, Vera's hand moved to her bosom and pressed fiercely against its terrible tumult. An iciness as of death made her shudder. Henceforth nothing but death would make an end of her agony.

PART TWO: ANNE

CHAPTER IX: ANNE'S MORNING

I

ANNE suddenly awoke. It was morning, and the room was quite light. She could see the very clear sky, which was not blue but grey; and the ugly roofs of other houses, as small as their own, beyond the space represented below the level of her gaze by gloomy back-yards. And everything appeared to be radiant with colour and interest. If there had been green leaves and the cheeping of birds, if the air had been soft and sweet as it was in the country, beauty would have been more intense but her own happiness could hardly have been greater. Anne had awakened smiling, and she still lay, full of eager joy, thinking of yesterday's happenings. Never in her life had she been so happy. It would have been impossible at any time for Anne to feel greater happiness.

Little quick, brusque movements of her head presently showed her all that was in the room, and all that could be seen from where she lay of the outside world. If the houses, the grey slates of which obtruded themselves upon her vision, were ugly, at least those who dwelt within them were alive, and it was very sweet to be alive. To Anne at this moment death was far away, and so was all that held pain or terror. Only life was within her ken. She loved deeply, and was now happy because Mortimer loved her. His kisses were yet fresh upon her lips.

Within a few feet of Anne lay Vera, fast asleep; and Anne paused for an instant in her dream, arrested by consciousness of Vera. Her eyes at first fell, unseeing, upon that motionless figure; and then they were sharply caught by something in Vera's attitude, for Vera lay with her arms pressed close about her head, and her body so turned that the clothes were crumpled and awry. Such an attitude indicated that during the night she had been very restless, and that, worn out, she now slept too heavily for repose. She would awaken unrefreshed, leaden-eyed, listless and without spirit. So much was clear at a glance. Apprehensiveness followed. Was Vera ill? Anne's loving eyes were immediately anxious. It had been strange of Vera to faint the previous evening—she had never done such a thing before. To faint, and to seem sad . . . To be chilled and unenthusiastic at the incomparable news which Anne had so eagerly communicated first to her. How singular—at this time . . . Anne had expected quite another kind of reception for her news.

Anne's mind roved. She tried to account for Vera's illness. Had Vera some secret? A distress? Was she in love? Anne thought not, because apart from Mortimer Vera was seeing little of any man. In earlier days, so attractive as she was, Vera had had swift friendships; but not lately. She had spoken of no other. Ah, Anne was puzzled. She was impatient. It was such a pity that Vera would never confide until the last moment, but withheld everything until it was too late to attack, to amend. That was her failing—a secrecy unlooked for amid her quick responses to life. She thought one should all the time *know* what she was feeling, and was exasperated when the electrical changes of her moods outpaced sympathy. She would taunt obtuseness when the time was past . . . So emotional, and so greatly needing love and care, she would not yield herself to love

and care, but with a sort of brittle fragility of temper made those who loved her feel clumsy and ill at ease. If only she had been more simple! Anne sighed. She recalled Vera's self-blame of a short time before, when she had almost cried with distress. How extraordinary that had been! Yes, but in illness one at times felt miserable. It was common to have such moods. They were uncontrollable. Had this meant more than a mood?

Anne could not tell. A mood with Vera might mean nothing at all. It might be without foundation, the sudden whim of an unstable child. Yet this mood had endured; her fainting was but the end of a series of little signs which hurried back now to Anne's sharply stimulated memory. Was Vera in some way troubled by accidents or happenings of which Anne knew nothing? It was so difficult to discover. It was so impossible to learn without questioning, and questioning was hateful. Anne grew quickly self-reproachful for her own shortcomings. She felt she should have known, have understood more of Vera than she did. Vera was her sister, younger, more childish; and Anne realised that Vera was a mystery to her.

All that was clear was that Vera was not happy; and that Anne, lost in her own thoughts, had taken too little heed of the symptoms of unhappiness as they arose. How wrong, how selfish, she had been, thought Anne, to be so absorbed, and to ignore Vera so cruelly. It was wicked to be so full of thought of one's self and one's own happiness that one had no care for others! Wicked! Anne did not spare herself. She felt that she must change; that she must give more than she had done. When she herself was so happy, it was unbearable to think that Vera was suffering.

Very silently, so as not to disturb Vera, Anne sat up in bed. And as she sat up her self-reproach for an in-

stant ceased to trouble her, because the happiness she felt was stronger than any other feeling whatsoever. She could not believe that aught would ever mar the face of life, so inexpressibly lovely was the prospect which beckoned her onward, and so vivacious was the spirit within herself which responded to that irresistible invitation.

II

Leaving Vera still sleeping, Anne quietly washed and dressed. All her movements were very quick, very easy, as though she knew by instinct where everything she needed was to be found. An onlooker might have been impressed by her lack of hesitation; only Anne knew that upon this morning she dressed without thought, as if she still dreamed.

By the time she reached the kitchen, Mum, from the old habit, was already there. Mum was moving about, and laying the table, and making ready a breakfast of which she alone would eat with any heartiness. Mum looked very small and slight; her spectacles looked larger than ever. She wore a strange pinafore with a pattern of enormous flowers upon it, and the flowers dwarfed her. To herself, she sang faintly, and every now and then her voice would hit a note which it could sing, so that this note flew out of her like the shrill pipe of a boy just learning to whistle. Otherwise Mum's music was a sort of groaning, and it was hard to distinguish the burden of her song. Anne, well-accustomed to Mum's voice, paid no heed to it, but brushed her own shoes and rinsed her hands and cut some bread, and then sat down at the breakfast table, very sedate in appearance, but so light of heart that she too this morning could have sung.

"Where's Vera?" asked Mum, from the scullery.

Anne jumped up again from the table, and went out to the scullery.

"She's still asleep. I thought she'd better not be disturbed."

Mum looked over her glasses at Anne.

"She won't thank you for that," remarked Mum. "Perhaps it's best, though."

"She's sleeping very heavily. Poor old thing, I expect she's tired out."

"She really ought to see a doctor."

"Won't she?"

Mum shrugged. A short sigh escaped her, like a note from her song.

"I wanted her to, last night," she said, gloomily. "There's no doing anything with her."

At that, Anne fairly laughed.

"Oh, nonsense, Mum," she cried. "If she's ill——"

"She's restless. Got the jumps."

"I suppose she wants a holiday."

Mum frowned, and shook her head.

"She's been like this for weeks," she complained. "Just think of the way she was talking the other day. Silly. She can't stay indoors; and she won't go out. It's for all the world as if she was crossed in love."

Anne was struck again by the thought which had come to her earlier.

"I don't think she can be. I did think of that. But there isn't anybody."

"That's just it," retorted Mum, practically. "We don't know."

At which Anne, slightly ruffled, rebuked Mum very severely.

"Now, look here, Mum," she said. "All you're thinking is silly. Vera didn't mean anything at all by what she said. I *know* you're wrong. You're horrid to think

it. She was just out of sorts; and you know how, when you're out of sorts, you think ridiculous things—about yourself, and about other people, too."

"I'm not thinking anything horrid," protested Mum.

"You're thinking she's meeting somebody we don't know about."

"No, I'm not," cried Mum.

"What, then?"

Mum shook her head, as if to show that she would not say another word upon that subject. Anne, looking at her with a kind of loving indignation, realised that Mum was too much for her. Mum had always been too much for her, and would continue so until the end of her days.

"There's lots of things about Vera that you'll never understand," remarked Mum, at last. "She'd do things you wouldn't think of doing. That's one of them."

"But nice things, Mum," urged Anne.

"Oh, not so awfully nice," answered Mum, smartly. "I'd rather trust you than Vera; but I wouldn't trust *anybody* too far."

"Mum!" It was almost horrified.

"No. Not even you!" cried Mum.

Anne felt the blood rising to her cheeks.

"That reminds me," she said, confusedly. "I've been doing something I've got to tell you about."

"Oh," remarked Mum. "I *thought* you had," and said no more.

"Yes," temporised Anne. "I went out with Mortimer yesterday, and we're going to get married." She was quite scarlet now, and her lips were unsteady, and her eyes stared at Mum.

Mum stared back at Anne; then she put down the knife she was carrying, wiped her hands, and stared again at Anne, who was turning away with her head high.

"Oh," said Mum, and showed how expressive of many simultaneous emotions an "oh" can be.

"Oh, Mum; aren't you pleased?" asked Anne, swiftly. She was beside her mother now, bending slightly, her arm round Mum's shoulders. "Say you're pleased." She was beseeching, very humble, drained of all that pride which made the invulnerable Anne.

"Of course I'm pleased," said Mum, with emphasis. "It's splendid. It's just that . . . well, it's the first time I've heard it." She kissed Anne.

"Really pleased?" Anne looked straight into Mum's eyes, searchingly, in spite of herself rather serious.

"Good gracious me, girl. What's come over you?" demanded Mum, as if amazed at her humility. "Of *course* I'm pleased. I think Mortimer's very lucky. *Very* lucky."

"And me, too, mother?"

"Well, as to that . . ." hesitated Mum.

"I am."

"Yes, dear. I love Mortimer. I always hoped——"

"Ah!" interrupted Anne, with glee. "You wicked old thing. You frightened me. Oh, dear me, I'm so glad you're glad . . ."

Mum kissed her again. She was beaming. They were both beaming.

Suddenly, from above, they heard a faint sound. It was made by the slight movement of Vera's bed, as they both knew; and they realised that Vera was awake and moving in her bed. At the sound, Anne went to the kitchen door and called upstairs.

"Come along, Vera."

There came a faint call in reply, and Mum went back again into the scullery to finish preparing the breakfast. Anne did not see Mum's face as she went. She was no longer thinking of Mum, but only of Mortimer, and

of her thankfulness at the discovery that Mum was glad about Mortimer.

III

By the time Vera was downstairs Anne was ready to leave the house; and all she saw of Vera was a white face, set in an expression of extreme coldness. Vera was like a ghost, holding herself very still, and looking straight before her with a glance of horror. It was painful to see her so ill.

"Is your head still bad?" asked Anne.

"Awful," she heard, in faint response. Vera looked past her, and away, her eyes flying.

"Shall I telephone to Blankenburg's to say you can't come?"

"No!" It seemed to be almost a shout.

Mum looked up quickly at the tone, evidently quite startled at its fierceness.

"You're not fit to go, Vera," she exclaimed. "Bed's the best place for you."

All nerves, Vera glared at them both, catching her breath, and looking rollingly upward, with her brows drawn, as if she could not bear to exert the effort of attention they demanded of her.

"I'm going," said Vera, almost sullenly, and yet with so sorrowful an air that her sullenness was diminished even as she spoke. "I don't want any breakfast."

Anne impulsively shook her head at Mum, who was about to speak; and Mum's parted lips met again in response to this warning. All three were silent. Vera sat listlessly at the table, heavy-eyed, her face so dark that it frightened Anne to see her. But Anne knew that concern was an emotion which must not here find expression. Vera would not meet their pity, but would be

bored and exasperated by it. Sitting there, she at last drank some tea very drearily, remote from Mum and Anne, like a stranger to them both.

"I'm going now," whispered Anne to Mum, and received a speechless nod in reply. She rose from the table, went out of the room, and upstairs to put on her hat. With a last call of good-bye she ran out of the house, closing the front door after her, and stepping on to the already warm pavement without. Her head down, she hurried along the street.

"I'm a coward," she thought. "I'm glad to be out-of-doors . . . away from . . . I ought to have . . ."

But what she ought to have done, Anne could not tell, even to herself. Her sense of responsibility was alert, yet it supplied no hint as to any action of hers which might have relieved the tension at home. Her steps were less rapid than usual. They faltered.

"I'm stupid," thought Anne. "I never know what to do."

IV

So she went to the omnibus, and to the West End, to a street in which Kilburn's had their offices, and at last to her own room upon the first floor of the building. Kilburn's were in a house—originally a residence—which had been converted to its present use as a set of offices with minimum expenditure. It was a dark old house in the midst of other dark old houses, and the stairs creaked languidly as one went up and down them. Walls and ceilings were solid, doorways were high; all that one saw spoke of a sort of middle-aged antiquity. And yet there was an air of distinction in this elderliness. Visitors to Kilburn's were always impressed by it. Coming from the street, they stumbled into the front office,

and wondered to see it so dark, and such a mixture of old and new. Here they were treated cavalierly by a youth who used a moist hair brush in the mornings and retained all day the half-clean air which his morning ablution gave him; and at last, if such was their fortune, climbed the creaking stairs to one or other of the offices above.

Kilburn's published two monthly magazines and a weekly journal. The magazines were semi-technical, but not more than semi-technical. One was devoted to popular art, and the other to the garden. The weekly journal was a combination of the two monthlies. It specialised in the garden, but was called *Garden Colour* and sought to make every garden a picture. From these three periodicals, and from some handbooks upon popular art and the garden, with various other side lines, Kilburn's extracted annually profits which, upon a small capital, and a small expenditure, were substantial. The firm was now branching out, and selling little mounted three-colour reproductions of pictures by popular modern artists, little calendars, reassuring secular texts for use by the hypochondriacal, diaries for gardeners, and the like. Always art and the garden were borne in mind by the firm. Never did they step from the narrow path into which grandfather Kilburn had led his first employés. Every garden a picture was still the firm's motto; every garden a picture, and every picture a story. The gardening part of the business was thus better than the artistic. Grandfather Kilburn had been an amateurish painter, and his sentimental representations of rosy-cheeked children with various pet animals had been eyesores; but his garden had been the best that Sydenham could produce half a century before the present, and his enthusiasm for painting and planting had led directly to the Kilburn publications.

There was now only a shadowy Kilburn interest in the firm. A grandson of the founder wandered in and out of the editorial offices, but did little work in them. Nominally, he was editor of *Pencil and Palette*: in fact, the work was done by a smart young man who had begun as office-boy and who had picked up all he knew of art while he was at work in the office. This smart young man's name was Twist. He did most of the practical editorial work. The content of *Garden Glory* was largely supplied by outside contributors, but it was Mr. Twist who turned their work to account and gave the paper a personality of its own. Over him, as editor-in-chief, was another character, Mr. Leicester, a man who, when sober, could give dulness an air of mystery, and a paragraph about a packet of seeds the distinction of clarity. And, besides Mr. Twist and Mr. Leicester, there was Mr. Sims.

Mr. Sims was in a better position than either Mr. Leicester or Mr. Twist. At a word from Mr. Sims, both Mr. Twist and Mr. Leicester would have been forced to leave the firm. They, although they had worked there for fifteen years and a quarter of a century respectively, and although they knew the business through and through, and could produce the papers unaided, had no status. They could be dismissed at a month's notice Mr. Sims could not be dismissed. Although the junior, he was, by his purchase of a larger share, the principal partner in the firm. Mr. Twist and Mr. Leicester could run the business, and Mr. Sims could not do so; but Mr. Sims had had the good fortune to possess a rather wealthy uncle, and he was for this reason favourably situated. It might have been supposed that Mr. Sims thought highly of Mr. Twist and Mr. Leicester, and valued them for their long service and experience. He did not so value them. To him they were both merely employés, to be

kept or dismissed at his own will. Any suggestion that they knew more about the business than he could ever learn would have amused Mr. Sims. Was the business not his, by purchase?

Mr. Sims was the man in Kilburn's who most interested Anne. She was his secretary. When Anne went to her own room at Kilburn's it was really to Mr. Sims's room that she went, for, although she had by courtesy a small cubicle to which she could retire if Mr. Sims wished to entertain in private, she ordinarily spent her whole day at another desk in the same room as the managing partner. It was a large back room upon the first floor. From its windows—both of them very long and large—Anne could see blackened bricks and some strips of gardens in which blackened trees gave shelter to blackened sparrows. The sky could be seen, and at this time of the year there were green leaves upon the trees. Within the room was luxury. Mr. Sims had a carpet, a superb roll-top desk of the latest pattern, a rich arm-chair for the visitor, a cushioned swivel-chair for himself; while upon the grey papered walls was a range of pictures which in modernity and decorative interest transcended anything so far reproduced by the firm in three colours. The room faced west and received only the dying heat of the sun; it was therefore warm in winter and cool in summer. Upon its mantelpiece were toys bought by Mr. Sims during a pre-War visit to Russia. The grey of the walls was chilled by woodwork which was painted a clear crimson, but this same grey gave life to the pictures and to every warmer hue in the carpet, the arm-chair, and the furniture. The room was thus full of colour; and as Mr. Sims was extremely tidy and almost excessively methodical it was never out of order for more than ten minutes or so in any one day. It was like a model room such as one may see set apart

in a large furnishing store. Mr. Sims took much pride in all its details.

It was to this room that Anne came in the morning. She was forced to be very punctual, because Mr. Sims was himself very punctual. He lived in a service flat in the centre of the West End of London, had everything prepared for him, from his bath to his breakfast, left his flat exactly at quarter-past-nine, and was in the office as exactly by the half-hour. It was Anne's duty to precede him by just so long as would give her time to tidy her hair and begin the cleaning of her typewriter.

To-day Anne was early. She had finished preparing her typewriter for the day's work before she heard the running step of Mr. Sims upon the stairway. An instant later the handle of the door was seized by a stern hand, and Mr. Sims was in the room. There was a glimpse of a smart lounge suit, a bowler hat at the correct angle,—a slightly bored face, trim hair, mingled languor and energy of movement.

"Morning," drawled Mr. Sims, shutting the door, setting down his hat, and going straight forward to his desk. Anne heard the shuddering of the top of his desk, saw him pick up the two or three private letters which awaited him, and turned back to her preparations for the day. Mr. Sims never failed to drawl "morning" as he entered the room; he never failed thereafter to ignore her for the ten minutes following. Only when he had opened his private letters and had glanced at the correspondence which, already opened, awaited his attention, would Mr. Sims say, each morning, in the same voice: "Oh, er, Miss . . . Treacher."

Anne waited. Mr. Sims looked through his correspondence. She could observe his frown of concentration as he read one letter.

"Demn!" said Mr. Sims. Then, recovering himself,

but still scanning the letter which he held in his hand: "Oh, er, Miss . . . Treacher."

Anne smiled at the familiar hesitations; but she rose from her desk, and went across the room to his side.

V

Mr. Sims was about thirty. If you went a couple of generations back in his ancestry you would find hardware (a small shop in a busy English town); but his father had been active in what became a large manufacturing business in the Midlands. To this business the Sims family owed their fortune. Mr. Sims's father had died soon after marriage, before his position in the business had been consolidated, and an uncle (who thus acquired control of the manufacturing business and by his own enterprise carried it to success) had brought up young Edgar Sims by way of private schools and a sudden brief flowering at Oxford. Having sons of his own, uncle George Sims could do no more for his nephew than this and a gift of the money by which Edgar had purchased his share of the Kilburn enterprise.

The flowering at Oxford had been checked early by the War, and nothing but a faint tinge of the Oxford manner remained to Edgar of the eighteen months which he had spent at the University. His birth and his experience at Oxford and in Flanders had reacted normally upon the character of this young man, who thus had trade in his bones and in his manner the assurance born of trade, his sojourn at Oxford, and four years' service as subaltern, lieutenant, and captain in the British Army. Under a manner of elaborate ease, Edgar Sims had determination; and it was possibly some defect in the quality of the determination, as well as a defect in the quality of the manner, which made one immediately recognise

in Edgar both manner and determination. In the best natures neither manner nor character is obtrusive. Mr. Sims could not hide his contempt for others. He did not realise that a gentleman should have no contempt.

As she stood by his side, Anne, looking down, observed the thick black hair which Mr. Sims brushed straight back from his brow, and the pucker in that same brow which was often to be seen early in the morning. She could never tell what Mr. Sims was thinking, because the darkness and immobility of his features concealed from one as simple as herself all that he desired to hide. She might have guessed at dissipation from the set of his lips, as she certainly did from his bold, appraising glance, but of his immediate thoughts she could have no inkling. She was too inexperienced for that. Only Mr. Sims's ties, collars, shirts, socks, and the cut of his clothes furnished Anne with news of his concern with appearance; only the puckered brow betrayed his faint self-consciousness.

"Know anything about tha-at?" drawled Edgar Sims.

Anne took the letter which he handed to her. A glance at it was enough to show that this was not the letter as to which he had intended to consult her. It began——

"Dear Flip. Why the hell didn't you show up on Sunday—I had the damnedest job to keep . . . We had a very merry little . . ." So many words Anne's eye took in at her first glimpse of the ugly scrawl.

"Not this one," she said, drily; and handed the letter back.

"Not? O-oh . . ." Mr. Sims's slowly articulated "Oh" held all the vowel sounds. He took the letter from her rather disdainful fingers. "Stupid of me," he said —not apologetically, but as a conventional declaration. "*This* one." He re-read the letter of protest. "I say,

did I say I'd go up the river on Sunday with Billy Towne? D'you remember?"

"Not to me."

"Damned fool, Billy. He's always messing things. I'll ring him up. Just get him for me, will you?"

Anne made no comment, but went to the telephone which stood upon her desk. As she asked for the number, and listened to the strange crackling roar of the London telephone system, she was remembering Billy Towne very clearly. Billy was a man of similar type to Mr. Sims, who always tried to talk to her when he came to see Mr. Sims. He had once invited her to go to dinner with him—Mr. Sims being out of the room at the time, —and she had refused so blandly that his admiration for her had evidently been much increased. Billy was what Anne, in childhood, had been taught to call a "masher." To him, any young and pretty woman was a person to be wooed. He was that permanently immature being, a man of the world. Mr. Sims was of sterner calibre. Billy was an idler, with an income of about fifteen hundred pounds a year and an annual expenditure of something over two thousand pounds. Edgar Sims had some hundreds from other sources, and about fifteen hundred a year from Kilburn's. The two men had been in the same regiment during the War, and Billy Towne retained the mentality of a subaltern. But Billy was so cheerful, and so obviously bent upon catching pleasure as and when it flies, that he was the more immediately likeable of the two men. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Anne was beginning also to like Edgar Sims.

At first she had disliked him very much. She had been working in the Kilburn office for some months before his entry, and her sympathies were with the old order. Anne was instinctively a conservative, and in that her

father's daughter. When she was chosen to be Mr. Sims's secretary her impulse was to rebel. Mr. Twist and Mr. Leicester had been so kind to her that she had enjoyed working for them. She had accepted their standards. Kilburn's had been happy with Mr. Twist and Mr. Leicester in control, and Anne, being very young, had found their ways very pleasant. Those days of pleasant happiness were now gone. They had been rudely cut, as if by death. The new order was ruthless. Mr. Sims had come into the business to command. He had made it clear from the beginning that the firm was his, by purchase, and that in future it was to be run in his interest alone.

This was natural enough to those who appreciate the virtue of wealth; but for the old order it was painful. The old staff had worked willingly, but at ease. Its members had felt that they had a vague common object, and they had drawn their salaries without questioning what profits were otherwise made or to whom they went. They had been easy-going comrades, working for a sentiment. All now was changed. Instead of being a part of Kilburn's, that undefined commonwealth which they had loved, they had suddenly become mere employés of Mr. Sims. They, unhappy men, had thought the business theirs, because it had grown under their hands; now, after all, it was taken away from them. Mr. Sims had bought it for cash, and he proposed to run it for cash. He had no use in business for anything but business. Mr. Sims, coming into the firm as a working capitalist, might be a cuckoo in the nest, but he was a cuckoo who had paid his footing. He took no heed of his staff, save as a staff. If it worked well, he would keep it; but he was not interested in the feelings of Mr. Twist and his colleagues. He could not imagine the grief with which the old workers found themselves reduced to the rank of

paid servants. He began to reorganise the firm upon modern business lines. When he did that Mr. Sims killed a spirit, but if he had realised the spirit Mr. Sims would still have killed it. He did not desire loyalty, but efficiency. No employer can command both in full measure.

All this Anne saw clearly. She disliked Mr. Sims for being so curt to Mr. Twist and Mr. Leicester. It was obtuse of him, but in relation to these men Mr. Sims saw himself only as their employer. He had commanded men in the army, and he thought the methods of the army good enough for everyday life. In this he had certainly one great advantage. His staff opposed his judgment at their peril, and at their peril showed that they, like himself, were men.

Anne, hating that economic law which gives even a kind employer arbitrary power over those who are without capital, saw Mr. Sims making changes before he understood the reasons against change. She saw him taking up Mr. Twist's work or Mr. Leicester's work and altering it without reference to Mr. Twist or Mr. Leicester, without reference to their knowledge and their skill. She saw him in every matter confident of his own better judgment, as if he supposed himself to have been born full of experience. More bitterly, she saw the impotence of Mr. Twist and Mr. Leicester, who were powerless to resist Mr. Sims, not because they were less able than he, but because Mr. Sims's uncle had made a great deal of money, and because Mr. Sims, with some of that money, had paid for this business in cash. It was his business, and he could do what he liked with his business, even to the extent of ruining it. They must do as they were told, or Mr. Sims would find other servants. It was a hard law of the social system, and Anne was as unable to redress it as any other.

And then, gradually, she had begun to see that Mr.

Sims also was human. He had something in his character which made him less than hateful. Confident he was, and insensitive; but others were faulty as well as he, and Mr. Sims was not without charm. Sometimes, even, he was humble to herself. Forgetting occasionally that he was her employer, he would tell her, still in his lazy, drawling way, of some annoyance or apprehensiveness which he felt. He was forced to confide in her about men and women who telephoned to him and who had to be tactfully dismissed; and as he found that Anne cheerfully did as she was told, without encroaching, as a girl less distinterested would have done, Mr. Sims told her more about himself, and about his way of life. He grew more courteous to her, as if she were a human being. In Anne's presence he grew more courteous to others. And he never attempted to flirt with her. The snubs which he still dealt carelessly to members of the staff—out of an incurable arrogance and lack of imagination—were increasingly withheld from Anne.

That was the point to which the acquaintance between Anne and Mr. Sims had attained at the first moment of her engagement to Mortimer.

VI

The telephone conversation with Billy Towne having occurred, the day's work proceeded. Mr. Sims dictated some letters, saw Mr. Twist and other members of the staff, and gave various sets of instructions. Then he went out of the room to visit one of the departments. And it was surprising to Anne to know what relief she felt when Mr. Sims was gone. Her heart was light again. She was alone with her sweet thoughts.

And just as she had begun to dream the telephone bell rang. Anne, mechanically bending forward, answered.

Her heart gave a bound when she heard the voice that spoke to her. It was Mortimer's. Anne's cheeks flushed; she could not see the sparkle of her eyes, but radiance filled her consciousness.

"Anne."

"Yes." She was breathless; her voice was low.

"Quite well?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. Then a constrained voice said—

"I thought I'd ring you up."

Anne smiled at the constraint. It was so characteristic.

"A very good idea," she said. "It's lovely of you, Mortimer. How d'you feel?"

"Oh, all right. Anne . . ."

"Yes."

"I . . . I say, will you meet me somewhere this evening?"

"I thought you were coming . . ."

"I know. I'd rather not."

"You're shy!"

"No, I'm not. Well, perhaps I am. I'd rather you met me. Look here; I must ring off. A man here. Say half-past seven—at the station?"

"Yes."

He was gone. The crackle of the telephone was interrupted. Its note changed. Anne sat back in her chair, wondering. It had been arranged that Mortimer should call for her at home in the evening. He was not coming. She was to meet him instead. That, so far, was simple enough; but it was stupid of Mortimer to turn suddenly shy. It was stupid and unfriendly, when they all loved him so well. And yet it was Mortimer! She could forgive him much more than this. Indeed, she could immediately see how much sweeter their meeting would be if no other emotion intervened.

And yet Anne was puzzled. There was the faintest hurt to her happiness.

She was still sitting at her desk, her eyes upon the sullen telephone, when Mr. Sims's voice made her start. He was back in the room, was looking at her. She did not understand at first what he said, so concerned was her mind with Mortimer's message.

"I beg your pardon," Anne stammered; and looked in return at Mr. Sims. His face wore so strange an expression that she was surprised afresh.

"I want this letter taken down," said Mr. Sims, with unusual abruptness.

Anne obediently reached for her notebook. But Mr. Sims did not begin to dictate, as she expected him to do. He went over to his desk, and stood there for a moment. Then he walked back again to the fireplace. Anne saw him put his hand to his chin, and at last rest his elbow upon the mantelpiece. But Mr. Sims did not long stand by the fire. Instead, he addressed Anne directly.

"Was that some one on the phone for me?" he asked.

"No. For me," Anne said.

She was puzzled at the question, not at all confused.

"Oh, I see," answered Mr. Sims.

"You wanted a letter?"

"Never mind, thanks."

Mr. Sims sat down at his desk, and until lunch-time did not again speak to Anne. They both worked steadily, in silence. There whipped into Anne's mind the thought: "How did he know I had been speaking on the telephone?" And the retort, which brought back all her joy by its truth and impudence: "It's no business of his, anyway."

CHAPTER X: DEBATE

I

IN the evening Anne sought Mortimer at their appointed meeting place. She had been a little perturbed at Mum's reception of the news that Mortimer was not coming. Mum had said nothing whatever. Having had a day to think over the engagement, she was demure, and had kept her head down. Anne—as carelessly as possible, for she was so jealous of Mortimer's standing in the eyes of others—had told Mum that she was going out to see Mortimer, and she had been met with silence. To have questioned the silence would have been to provoke criticism of Mortimer, and this she could not have borne. So she had returned silence for silence, and now walked to the tryst with an unsatisfactory chill upon her spirits. When she saw clouds overhead, Anne had ado to keep her natural cheerfulness. Then, however, she caught sight of Mortimer, and her doubts were scattered.

He was standing almost moodily with a walking-stick behind him, and was gazing down at his feet, or at the pavement in front of his feet, with such an air of absent-mindedness that Anne's love started into laughter once more. He was a child—to be teased, to be taken seriously, to be adored; possibly unstable, he must be tranquillised and protected from the assaults and sunderings of evil. Anne smiled. She hastened, intent upon surprising him, eager for his surprise and delight in her unexpected nearness.

But when Anne was a dozen yards distant Mortimer, aware of her coming, looked up. A colour spread in

his pale cheeks, and he stepped forward. She was taken afresh by his grace, his gravity, and his strangeness. To Anne, all these characteristics were adorable. They made within her bosom a beauty of feeling to which no other feeling could be compared. In this mood Anne gave him her hand, which Mortimer still held as they turned together to walk from the traffic-turbulent high-road.

"I wasn't late?" asked Anne, breathlessly. Strange that her heart should so throb! Strange and silly and sweet! "I hurried. I've hurried all day. I left the office punctually, in spite of Mr. Sims."

"Did he try to keep you?" demanded Mortimer, as if with proprietorial indignation.

"Yes. There wasn't anything to do; but he began to talk."

They were by now in a quieter street, crowded with grey tall houses with forbidding bow-windows and attics and basements. Nobody was near, but every window was an eye; every lace curtain trembled with interest in this exceptional promenade. Sedately Anne and Mortimer walked between these grey, stupid-looking houses, so respectable and shabby and old-fashioned that they recalled other, more prosperous days, when rich people had lived in them, and so stood aloof from two modern lovers. The streets were deserted. No steps sounded upon the solid pavements or the grey, flint-strewn surface of the roadways. All was still, discreetly mellowed in the late sunlight, which was already yellowing as the sun declined. The two friends were alone, walking slowly at ease in the solitary streets. The houses craned high above, watching.

"What did Mr. Sims talk about?" asked Mortimer.

"I can't remember," laughed Anne. "I wasn't listening."

"Himself?"

"It may have been. Yes, I think it was. I couldn't be expected to listen to that sort of thing. Could I?"

"No," said Mortimer. "I suppose you seemed interested, or he wouldn't have talked."

To herself Anne laughed at his seriousness. But she was pleased that Mortimer should accuse her. She was brimming now with happiness.

"Well, I didn't interrupt him, I admit," she said. "I let him go on."

"Yes; that's what women do," grumbled Mortimer. "They're so adept."

"Be quiet. I'm not 'women.' You wouldn't like me to generalise about men."

A quick suspicion shadowed Mortimer's face.

"I expect you could do even that," he made answer.

"But I shan't do it. I'm too wise. No. Whatever made Mr. Sims go on talking, it wasn't any encouragement I gave him. I suppose he hadn't anything else to do, and so he talked. I do vaguely remember he said something about loneliness."

"Loneliness, eh? I know all about loneliness."

"Don't we all know something about it?" asked Anne, sobered for an instant.

"And then he went on talking about himself?"

"It was his loneliness, you see," explained Anne, mischievously.

"And what else did he say?" Mortimer was persistent.

"I *really* didn't notice. I was busy thinking about—about more interesting things." Thus Anne endeavoured to dismiss the topic. But Mortimer was not to be evaded.

"What were you thinking about?" he demanded. He seemed unable to give her any peace. His unusual persistency was actually trying her patience. And yet it showed at least concern with herself, and so should have

been gratifying. Anne hesitated, wondering if he could yet bear to be teased.

"I was wondering why you wouldn't come to supper as we planned," she ventured.

Mortimer stiffened at once. How extraordinary of him!

"I didn't want to come," he said, coldly.

"Did you feel it was too 'engaged' a thing to do?" asked Anne, quickly. She saw Mortimer's jerk away from her, his slight frown. "Look, dear; the only thing I minded was that I felt Mum would be disappointed. She loves you very much."

"Mum? Yes, I hadn't thought of her. I ought to have come." He was thoughtful at once, nodding.

"It doesn't matter," urged Anne. "You'll come soon. It's nicer for us to meet like this. I hate the thought of you as a 'young man.' Though of course you *are* one."

"Quite," said Mortimer, with a note of dryness. Then: "Have you . . . did you . . ."

"Yes. Mum's delighted. I knew she would be."

Mortimer gave Anne one of his shocks. He could always give her shocks.

"She thought I was very lucky?" he demanded.

"Either you or I—I forget which," Anne replied, demurely.

"What a lot you forget." Mortimer seemed to muse. "Say it was I . . ." He continued to walk along full of thought, with Anne's hand tucked within the crook of his arm. "It's true enough. I don't mind her thinking that." He looked sideways at Anne. "She was really pleased?"

"You're awfully vain, Mortimer!" protested Anne. "You want me to tell you all she said?" Anne was smil-

ing, but she was nevertheless disquieted at his tone. She remembered Mum's hurting silence.

"Only what was pleasant," said Mortimer. "You see, Mum's too wise to take me——" He checked himself, and instead of completing the sentence he smiled.

"To take you seriously?"

"At *your* valuation."

"Poor Mortimer. You shouldn't be so troubled. I'm sure you're wrong to think of yourself as somebody who's underrated."

"I don't!" The protest was mild, but sincere.

"You take a poor view of yourself, and believe that other people have that view. It's wrong. You think you're transparent. Nobody's that—nobody honest."

Anne reassuringly pressed his arm, in her love.

"Am I honest?" asked Mortimer. "I wonder."

"You're awfully like Vera, in some ways," added Anne. She felt the start he gave.

"Vera!" repeated Mortimer. "Oh, but how *absurd*, Anne!"

"Absurd, but true," she answered. "If you like, I'll say that Vera's exactly like you. She takes a particular view of herself—I won't say it's the same view that you take of yourself, because I don't think it is;—and she takes a particular course. But all the time she thinks the—sort of—*outside* view of her is antagonistic—that people are judging her harshly. Some people have a sort of sweet vanity; and they mix easily with other people. I don't think you do that."

"You think I'm vain?" asked Mortimer.

"At least, you're not conceited."

"It's so *strange*," he murmured, "that you should say that. Perhaps I'm going to see myself quite newly in your eyes, Anne."

"Look!" she teased, and her lids quivered. She turned her eyes to his, and as quickly away, fearing that they betrayed too clearly the tenderness which it was so impossible to conceal.

Mortimer could not resist the temptation of her coquetry. Before all those endless grey houses reared high in scrutiny, he kissed her, and Anne felt her cheeks grow hot. It was something new to be kissed so passionately. New and strange and beautiful. Her eyelids no longer quivered. Her eyes had nothing to hide. Her heart was full of love.

"I feel these windows are crowded," Anne murmured. "Let's hurry now, and get away from them."

They hurried. Arm in arm, they hurried, while the glowing sun struck the walls above their heads, and made the shadows about them increasingly chill.

"But Vera," at last said Mortimer, as if he had been thinking all this time of what Anne had said—of the comparison she had made. "I'd always thought of Vera as so . . ."

Anne was struck by his hesitation.

"So *what?*" she asked.

"Nothing. I don't know. So impulsive; so quick and . . . perhaps I mean, candid."

"She's impulsive. Candid,—no. I don't think impulsive people *are* candid."

"D'you say she's difficult to read?"

"Very."

"Ah!" It was a breath. Suddenly Mortimer said: "Did you tell Vera?"

"First of all." Anne turned quickly to him. Mortimer was looking away, his eyes so averted that she could not see them at all. They were fixed upon the distance, as if blindly.

II

"Look here, Anne," he presently said. "How soon can we be married?"

Anne faltered. Her heart throbbed.

"How soon?" she asked. "As soon as that?"

"I want us to be married."

Anne felt her colour rising. She had not thought of marriage. When she spoke, her voice was unsteady.

"I wasn't prepared for that," she murmured. "I thought we should go on—being engaged—for . . . oh, for perhaps a year."

"I couldn't wait," said Mortimer. He was urgent. The grip of his elbow, which pressed Anne's hand to his side, was greater. His shoulder was against her breast. Anne, glancing up, met eyes that burned. In her heart she was flurried, although her encounter with Mortimer's urgent gaze was straight.

"Oh!" laughed Anne. But she was much moved. "I shall have to think about it."

"No, no. If you think, you'll delay. Why shouldn't we marry? Why wait till the sweets are familiar?"

"Will they ever be that?" Anne was shy, wondering. "I didn't suppose they staled very quickly."

"I want you," said Mortimer, imperiously.

"And you mustn't be kept waiting?" she questioned. But she was arch to no purpose. The impulse, indeed, had been confused. The clear face of Mortimer was close to her own. She saw his eager lips, his eyes demanding; and the archness, at first so half-hearted, died wholly. Was not this surrender to her lover's will what she most desired? It was a mystery to herself—a mystery unread, veiled, a perplexity. Whatever her desire had been, this, at least, was true, that she had no immediate answer to Mortimer's importunity. Anne sighed;

but the sigh was not an unhappy one. She continued: "Mortimer, you really *must* let me think!"

"Is there any reason?" He was unanswerable.

"None . . . except . . ." Anne hesitated. "Except that I haven't thought about it."

"Do you think about everything? Until there's no impulse left?"

There was something ugly in his tone, as though he sneered at her character; and Anne flinched from his attack. It was both unexpected and bitter. Did he love her?

"Do I deserve that?" she parried, fighting unarmed.

"I'm asking you." Mortimer chose to be exigent. Anne felt her heart plunge at his tone. She started, and stared. The first word that rose to her lips was checked; but there was the smallest drop of horror amid her warm love for him.

"Suppose we say it's my impulse to hesitate?" asked Anne, at last. "As it certainly is. Mortimer, I don't like being rushed. I don't like to talk as you're doing. I don't see any good in it. Remember, you've been *thinking* about this. You've got it all clear. It's new to me." She paused an instant before concluding. "Do be patient with me."

There was resoluteness in Anne's tone which she was far from finding in her heart. There, she felt, all was weakness. And, to increase this doubt, Mortimer shrugged. His face was set. She had never before seen him so uncontrollable. In vain did Anne search for any softening of his expression. There was a long silence. Then, at last, as they continued upon their way, Anne was seized with an idea.

"Mortimer," she said, suddenly. "I . . . I hate to say it; but a wife—a wife is an expense. . . . Have you thought of that?"

"O-oh!" It was clear that he found her too matter-of-fact. Anne felt her cheeks growing hot. Then the tension was strangely relaxed. "Not a great expense," said Mortimer, as he still frowningly looked askance. The pressure of his arm diminished. "Besides——" He stopped abruptly. Then, as she waited, he resumed: "Besides, need you . . . at first . . . give up your own work. I thought you could——"

"Oh, Mortimer!" It was out—a cry of disappointment. Anne's heart felt cold. She, too, allowed her clasp, which had been so happy, slightly to loosen. Quickly, she tried to recover whatever might have been lost to them both by that exclamation. "I'm sorry," she said. "I could very likely keep on at Kilburn's. I'm almost sure I could. Wouldn't it be better to wait? I think you're greedy for us both. Don't let's decide now."

"I can't wait," Mortimer persisted, clouded and obstinate. He stared straight before him; his mouth seemed to tremble, and the muscles of his throat. "If you love me, you'll see what a life I lead——"

"*If* I love you!" breathed Anne. Mortimer took no notice of her protest.

"I can't bear this loneliness any longer. I want you, because if you don't come now I shall go mad. You've no idea——" He was speaking impetuously, his voice strained and earnest, as if he were in an extremity of emotion. "You've simply no idea what it is to work all day and go home in the evening to a lodging where there's no home, no love, no interest; to have to kill time; to try to read and think—and fail; to come out in desperation into the streets, and see nobody one loves——"

"But, dearest," cried Anne, almost weeping. "I *do* love you. I do indeed."

"You refuse what I ask."

"I don't. But think! If I were to keep on working at an office I couldn't easily keep house for you. I should have to hurry off in the morning, and come home to my housework after you had been home some time. You'd get home to an untidy house—with no comfort, no wife to greet you. . . . And I——"

"Only for a time. Only until I could earn enough money for us both. If I had you, I could earn more. It would encourage me."

"But you could come every evening to see us at home. We could be together."

"Not really together. Never the door closed, and us two alone in the world. Oh, no, no, Anne; I'm right in this. My dear, don't let us waste any time. Let's get married *now*, and settle the details later."

Anne shook her head. She was troubled.

"It's spoiling it!" she cried, sharply.

"Spoiling it!" Mortimer's exclamation was equally sharp. "I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that we should begin wrong."

"I don't agree."

They walked onward now, both of them dismayed by their talk and by the difference which lay between them. Every time Anne thought of the proposed arrangement she shook her head. It was unwise. That was all she could say. It was unwise. Her heart was in conflict with her good sense. Her heart told her that Mortimer needed her, and that nothing must stand before the assuagement of his need. Her experience showed her that such a marriage began in passion and ended in estrangement. All her hopes had been for a little home of which she could be the mistress and Mortimer the master of it all.

Evening fell quickly now; the shadows crept upon them, at first lingeringly, and then with a swooping of

darkness. Already Anne could scarcely see Mortimer's face. She still kept her hand tucked within the crook of his arm, but that arm was no longer warm and possessive, but stiff with a mood of aversion. Anne felt her lips pucker into a smile; and indeed she thought Mortimer was being unreasonable. But she neither smiled nor spoke. She walked soberly enough by his side, wondering. After all, a young man was no easy problem for a young woman to solve. Mortimer, especially, was a very difficult one for Anne. Anne loved him.

"Aren't you being rather cruel?" she presently asked him, in a low voice.

III

"Cruel?" Never was there a better simulation of surprise than this of Mortimer's. He appeared amazed.

"Well, unreasonable?" she amended.

"I don't think so. I don't think so at all. One can't be reasonable in this sort of thing." He was rebuking her in terms which Anne well recognised. She had heard such rebukes from Vera. This one was not the more palatable upon that account.

"You think I'm being too reasonable?" questioned Anne. She was smiling now, but not very cheerfully.

"I think you're being unkind," retorted Mortimer. "I ask you to think of me; and you make objections."

"Aren't they just?" demanded Anne, with spirit. "I made them, thinking of you. You wouldn't like getting home to untidy, dirty rooms——"

"We could have a woman to clean."

"But *my* home!" The cry was torn from Anne. "That I wanted to make so lovely!"

Mortimer maintained his powerful silence. Anne, after that protest of despair, was unable to say more. She was

without resource. This that he asked of her was a sacrifice, not of herself, but of her pride, her dream—which had been one of untiring service, of a real home full of dainty things belonging solely to themselves, and possessively loved. She was now asked by Mortimer, with imperiousness and reproach, to sacrifice all pride—everything except her love for himself. And even that love was to be handicapped, since love consists in spontaneous sacrifice, and not in self-stultification. Anne was wretched. Quickly she saw ugly, dust-bitten rooms, the hideousness of lodgings and slatterns. . . .

Darkness was all about them. They wandered on, both alike unconscious of their path. Within the darkness were sparks and tongues of light, and above them the grey evening sky of summer. Anne could see far beyond the roofs of ugly houses this impalpable grey, and the clustered stars, and as she looked upwards there came a cool wind that filled her with a sense of peace. With the stars winking there, and the breeze upon her cheeks, the disorder of her thoughts was calmed. She turned to Mortimer, and with her slim little fingers slightly pressed upon his arm. And at the pressure Mortimer looked down into her face. She could see the gleaming pallor of his brow beneath the soft hat, and the darkness that were his mouth and eyes; could see the glow that his eyes held, and the strange line of his sensitive lips, which so betrayed his more simple moods and which now showed his displeasure with her.

"Are you angry?" asked Anne, shyly. "Don't be angry, Mortimer. I can see that I was being very . . . reasonable. Don't let's quarrel any more. We'll . . ."

The warmth of Mortimer's arm was again cordial. Then his arm was altogether withdrawn. As they both stood still, he put his two arms around Anne's waist, and held her tightly, so that he and she stood breast to breast,

his cheek against hers, pressed even fiercely. Mortimer's cheek was very cold; but Anne could feel his breath quite warm against her ear.

"Anne!" cried Mortimer. "We'll—what?"

Anne, soft in his arms, turned her face upwards.

"We'll find a way," she whispered. No more.

CHAPTER XI: MR. SIMS

I

ALL day the drowsing heat had been intense. A haze hung over London. There was no breeze to stir the languid air. Anne, the coolest person at Kilburn's, finished typing her last letter. She had already answered her last telephone call. Now, there remained only the final stroke of the hour, and she would be free for that day. She would be able to go home, to relinquish all thought of the office, to take up her life where she had left it in the morning, in entering the Kilburn front door.

Mr. Sims had been more than usually busy to-day. He had been clearing up a great deal of work, preparatory to taking a holiday. To-night he was going out of town until next Tuesday morning. Anne had a vista of two and a half calm days—a Friday, Saturday morning, and Monday during which she would be unmolested by the managing partner. Cruelly, she wondered how Mr. Sims imagined that the office could go on for so long without him. Never before, since his first coming, had Mr. Sims been a day away. She had listened to him, a score of times, telling persuasive friends through the telephone, that he could not be spared. And now Mr. Sims was going away.

The effect upon Kilburn's staff would be more evident the following morning. To-day there was suppressed excitement. To-morrow there would be such aeration of relief that all members would be kind. To-day they were all irritable, from the heat and the suspense. Mr. Sims was irritable, for other reasons. Mr. Sims had been

moody all the week; he was now as clearly upon tenterhooks as all the others. Only Anne was calm. That was because in one respect Kilburn's office was less full of harassing problems than her own home, her own life. Nevertheless, she too would be glad to say good-bye to Mr. Sims for a few days. The office would be at peace without him. She wished he might always be on holiday, allowing his income to arise naturally from the unimpeded effort of his servants.

Such a wish was vain. Anne well knew that although the office would function as well without Mr. Sims as with him Mr. Sims did not believe that. She half guessed that Mr. Sims, being of an active disposition, but without any special bent for art or craft or business, had bought this partnership for the sake of having something to do. He had created nothing in the business, and would create nothing, although he might vary much; but as he had no special bent he was in this business, as he might have been in any other business, as a sort of parasite. To the end that he might be occupied, and make money, he had ousted Mr. Twist and his colleagues. Anne, from her single experience of working capitalism, had been converted to strong hostility towards a permanent employing class.

Mr. Sims, innocent of her thoughts, stared at Anne from his own desk. She was aware of his close regard, although she ignored it. Mr. Sims, having nothing further to do, was evidently waiting, as Anne was waiting, for the end of the day. He was less debonair than usual, although he was as well groomed, and although, as obviously as ever, he had dressed with the greatest care. His grey tweeds made him look stouter than usual—Mr. Sims was not a tall man, and indeed he was below medium height;—and they revealed him to Anne, for the first time, as not wholly a man about town. They emphasised a quality of determination in Mr. Sims with which

Anne was acquainted, and they also made him look more boyish than usual. Mr. Sims was also, apparently, less sure of himself in tweeds than he was in his more fashionable clothing. A large bag stood in the corner behind his desk. It bore in big black letters the initials "E.F.G.S.," which stood for Edgar Ferdinand Gilbert Sims. A soft felt hat hung upon the hook near the door, and below it a light waterproof. These things Anne had seen all day, so that they were fixed in her memory. Without seeing them now she was conscious of the hat and waterproof and bag. She was conscious that Mr. Sims was staring at herself, his hands stretched across his desk, in idleness.

At last Mr. Sims rose to his feet, and stood by his desk. Anne knew that he had ceased to look at her. When he moved again, she had forgotten Mr. Sims. A vague trouble had seized her mind with regard to Mortimer. She was wondering what she must do to make Mortimer happy. She was wondering, too, whether, when she was married, Mr. Sims would still allow her to be his secretary and work at Kilburn's. If Mr. Sims had the prejudice against married women clerks which some members of the employing class had, what could she do? It would be too late then to unmarry herself. She and Mortimer would be indeed condemned to life on a pittance. Unconsciously Anne shook her head, and her heart was very heavy. Not thus, she felt, should happy married life begin. Happy married life should be free—at its beginning—of every thought but that of mutual love. It should above all be free of the smallest concern with money. Money—she *hated* money!

Mr. Sims sharply sat down again at his desk, knocking a heavy ruler to the floor, and causing Anne to jump. Her anxious dream was shaken. She was once again

sure that Mr. Sims was staring at her, and for the first time she moved uncomfortably.

II

"Er . . . Miss . . . Treacher," said Mr. Sims. He rose as he spoke, and went to the fireplace, resting his elbow carefully upon the rather high mantelpiece, so as not to disturb the Russian toys with which it was decorated.

Anne faced him. She could not understand what Mr. Sims was thinking. He stood with his head sunken in his shoulders, with pleats in his brow, his eyes cast down. One foot was upon the fender. He was curiously hunched, and a wry expression was upon his lips; his whole face was drawn into a self-consciously businesslike aspect.

"You got all those Hammond papers?" asked Mr. Sims, in his slowest of drawls, in which Anne always imagined that he elaborately dropped final "g's" and such syllables as are carefully articulated by the lower-middle classes.

"Yes. I've got them all."

"And if Thompson's write you know what to tell them?"

"Yes, Mr. Sims."

"If anybody rings up, I'm away for a few days."

"Yes."

"Don't let them know where I am."

"No, Mr. Sims."

"I want a rest."

Anne did not reply to that. She did not think it necessary to do so.

"Do you want any letters at all sent on?" she asked.

Mr. Sims shook his head.

"Not one," he answered, in his level tone of exhaustion. "I'm going to walk and bathe and sleep."

"It's a pity you're not going to be away longer," said Anne, impulsively.

Mr. Sims's eyebrows were lifted at that. She saw him look up from his interested contemplation of the hearthrug. It entered Anne's mind that perhaps she was now to receive one of the familiar snubs which Mr. Sims thought himself free to deliver to any employé. But if such a snub arose to Mr. Sims's lips it did not pass them. The wrinkles in his brow deepened. He raised his head a trifle. When he spoke his voice was still adjusted to its dying note of weariness, as if he had no other tone at command. And yet his words were not wholly weary.

"For your own sake, or mine?" was Mr. Sims's startling inquiry.

Anne laughed. She could not help it.

"I was thinking of you," she answered gravely. "It seems to me horrible to be in a city during the summer."

"You'd like to live in the country?" drawled Mr. Sims.

"Very much."

"Hm. . . . What about the winter?"

"I shouldn't mind. But, really, I should like to go to Italy for the winter."

"The devil you would!" cried Mr. Sims.

"You asked me," retorted Anne, cheerfully, "what I'd like."

"Oh, quite. . . . When d'you go for your holiday?"

"I should like to go at the end of this month."

"Go abroad?"

"No. Just somewhere in the country." Anne's heart beat ever so little faster; for this year Mortimer would

be with her. This would be their honeymoon, if all went well.

Mr. Sims looked at his watch.

"So you think the office could spare me," he said, drily.

Anne could not say, "I've heard you say that nobody is indispensable," which would have been, perhaps, a fair retort to his complacency. Instead, she made a less ingenuous answer.

"I think it would do you good."

"Yes," drawled Mr. Sims. "You don't think you'd miss me?"

"I expect we should *miss* you," said Anne, politely.

"But *you?*" asked Mr. Sims. It seemed almost as if he was rather breathless.

"I?" asked Anne, at first not understanding the purport of his speech. Then she realised that he was making a personal appeal to herself.

"Oh," she said—and for an instant could think of nothing else. It was with an effort that she very lamely concluded: "I expect it would seem rather strange."

"It would be rather strange," responded Mr. Sims, "for me. I mean, for me . . . not to see you every day."

III

Anne was puzzled by Mr. Sims's speech. It seemed to her to be such an odd speech, coming from Mr. Sims. From him, she was used to the peculiar form of insult which some men indulge—of ignoring a remark addressed to them, of showing contempt for others by means of glance or snub, of general superciliousness of demeanour. This new quietness, this peculiar pressingness of inquiry, quickened her pulse. It mystified her, also.

"Somehow one doesn't think of one's self as being a part of somebody else's background," said Anne, as if she were not puzzled at all. "I always think of myself as being invisible."

"Invisible?" Mr. Sims gave a kind of jump, and now frankly stared at her. "Oh, . . . er . . . Miss . . . Treacher; you certainly are not that."

Again Anne laughed.

"I know I'm not that, really," she said. "I only meant that I—I don't think I've got a very strong personality. It's very difficult to explain." She felt herself growing red. "I don't feel that I'm cast for a principal part. I'm very interested in what goes on—but from the wings, and not from—from any point where people can . . . see me."

"This is most interesting," murmured Mr. Sims. "Only, I assure you, you're quite wrong. You have a very strong personality." Anne said nothing. She was ashamed of having allowed herself so egotistical an outburst. "As to the other," resumed Mr. Sims. "Of course, I can't say how other people feel . . . I . . ."

The clock in the neighbourhood by which they all adjusted their own watches began at this instant to strike six o'clock. Anne rose at the first stroke.

"You'll miss your train, Mr. Sims," she cried

"Oh, there's another," was what she heard in reply.

"I'm to send nothing on, and to say you're away for a few days. And you'll be back first thing on Tuesday morning," Anne said, as if recording facts.

"Unless I dash back before."

She looked at Mr. Sims almost in consternation.

"Oh!" she cried. "You won't do that!"

"I mean it," he answered. Anne could not see his face, as it was half-turned away. "Don't you see, I want to continue this most interesting conversation."

Anne gathered together her little vanity bag and a book which she had upon her desk; and prepared to go without replying to his threat.

"Good-bye, Miss Treacher," said Mr. Sims.

"Good-bye." Anne at first did not see his outstretched hand, but when he came nearer, the hand still outstretched, she gave him her own. Mr. Sims held it firmly for an instant, and his left hand moved slightly, as though he was minded to bring it to the others.

"Four days," said Mr. Sims, shaking his head.

"Why, that's nothing at all," scoffed Anne, with her head back and her smile reassuring.

And then, the sense of his warm clasp still upon her fingers, she hurried to her little cubicle, where hat and dustcoat were kept. She was glad to escape. There had been a note in Mr. Sims's voice which jarred upon her—a thick, sentimental note. At another time, Anne's eyes would have been drolly rounded at the thought that Mr. Sims was trying to flirt with her. Now, when she had a real responsibility at hand, and when much depended upon her ability to stay at Kilburn's, the tone held something of menace. Faintly disturbed, Anne hastened from the office towards home.

CHAPTER XII: ENCOUNTER

I

FROM the moment she left Kilburn's office, Anne hurried. She hurried through the grimy, stale streets of the West End to the point at which she caught her omnibus. She hurried to the upper deck of the bus, to the vacant front seat; and when she could hurry no more she looked down upon the world and in her heart urged the bus-driver to lose no time in bringing her home.

Her spirits rose from the moment at which she parted from Mr. Sims. Mr. Sims was now out of the way for four whole days, and even this brief respite would be a notable relief. When he was in the room with her Anne was all the time troubled by prophetic imagination of the scene which would occur when she asked leave to get married and remain at the office. And in imagining this scene Anne was always filled with panic. What if Mr. Sims refused to employ a married woman?

The thought of being a married woman made Anne smile. She could not picture herself as a married woman. She could only picture herself as Anne. It was difficult to do even that. She could not see herself objectively, save in rare moments. In others lay all her interest.

To-night Mortimer was paying his first visit to Mum. He had delayed it as long, evidently, as he could; and now he was coming. He would be waiting at the end of the journey, and he and Anne would walk home together. Anne's heart went out to their meeting. Her thoughts outsped the omnibus, and went on in a flash to suppose Mortimer already expecting her near the spot where she would step from her chariot.

She imagined him standing back in the shadow, rather self-conscious, as though he felt that all who saw him would recognise the purpose of his waiting, and would nudge each other and wink at his tryst. And then Anne imagined his sight of her, and a slight reddening of his cheeks; his hat raised, and the contact of their hands, their arms, as they met and walked side by side.

"He'll drag behind . . ." Anne thought. "And I shall be brisk, and he won't like that. I shall be brisk and bluff and loud and crude. . . . He'll dawdle, and I shall hurry. . . . It's horrible of me to laugh at him, but he's awfully amusing, and like a little girl who doesn't want to go to school. I wonder if all men are as shy about some things as he is? He's known them both as long as he's known me. It's quite wrong that he should . . ." Her thoughts became more fluid, and were no longer expressed to herself in coherent phrases. They led her mind to a host of extraordinary places, speculations, and imaginings, caused it to turn somersaults and change its hue a thousand times in a moment; and at last so absorbed her that she was at her journey's end long before she had come to the end of the reverie into which she had been thus plunged.

II

There was Mortimer, as Anne had foreseen. He was waiting far back against the front of a building, so that he appeared almost to be lurking from sight; but at her coming he stepped forward with the utmost grace. Although he was shabby, he carried himself as a monarch might have done, fastidiously and with distinction. He had on a dark grey suit, rather baggy at the knees, and without any of its original lustre; but the suit fitted him well enough, and it was sober and clean. And at

sight of him Anne's heart gave a little jump of delight. She stepped from her omnibus very quickly, and was by Mortimer's side, once again—as she had so often done—reading his features and his expression, and feeling irresistible and exalting love for him.

"Hullo," said Anne, smiling at his gravity. "Have you been here long?"

"Five minutes," said Mortimer, the gravity breaking and being replaced by a charming self-consciousness. "Only five minutes."

"We shan't be long now, then. You haven't seen Vera? I expect she's home by this time."

"Is she?" obediently answered Mortimer.

"We've been bidding farewell to Mr. Sims at the office."

"That must have been very touching." Mortimer could be dry enough, but his dryness was never very subtle.

"I don't think he wanted to go. He almost frightened me by saying he might come back on Monday. I do hope he won't come."

"Does he think something will go wrong while he's away?" asked Mortimer.

Anne's mind flashed back to Mr. Sims's remarks. That had not been what Mr. Sims had said, of course. He had not hinted at the possibility of anything going wrong.

"No. I seem to think it was——" she began; and then laughed as she remembered Mr. Sims's expressions. "I think he said it was my conversation that he'd miss."

"Oh, your conversation," said Mortimer, giving Anne a queer look.

"You didn't know it was so remarkable, did you!" teased Anne.

"Oh, yes, I did," rejoined Mortimer. "I didn't know he appreciated it, though."

Anne could not be sure that he was serious. Her smile

was checked by the gravity of Mortimer's face, and as she had no mind to make him jealous of Mr. Sims she veered away from that topic and chose another. It was safer thus. And yet there was sweet as well as sour in the belief that Mortimer could be made to feel a little jealous.

III

They were home. Anne pushed the door wide open, and walked into the dark little house, with Mortimer close behind her. Not stopping to take off her hat, she waited until Mortimer had hung his hat upon a peg in the gloom of the passage and then led the way directly into the brown, warm, shabby old kitchen.

"Here he is, Mum!" cried Anne; and stood laughing while Mum kissed Mortimer.

"Why haven't you come before, Mortimer? We've quite missed you," exclaimed Mum, in her direct way. "Here's Dad saying he never sees you now, and telling me he wants to see you . . ."

"I expect he wants to know if you're insured, Mortimer," laughed Anne. "That's his first thought about anybody. Dad's like the writer who used to ask about everybody, 'Has he starved?' "

"Starved!" said Mum. "I expect Mortimer will say he *has* if you start talking, Madame Anne. Be off and take your hat off!"

"I'm just going. I wanted to see you two comfortably settled," Anne explained. "And to warn Mortimer what Dad will say when they *do* meet."

With that, she was gone; and an instant later was in the bedroom. She saw no sign there that Vera had been home. Nothing was disturbed. All was calm, as though it had lain so since the morning. Strange! Vera was

generally home by now. Why was she so late—upon this evening of all evenings? It was unkind. But she would soon be home, and they would all be happy together . . .

"I wonder why I'm so excited?" Anne suddenly asked herself. "It's most extraordinary. I suppose it's Mortimer's coming, and Mr. Sims's . . ." She thought of Mr. Sims's peculiar conversation, and paused. "Apparently it doesn't take much to make me excited," she said, half aloud. "Almost nothing at all. I must hurry."

IV

Having hurried, Anne was downstairs again within five minutes, to find Mortimer sitting in his old place with his back to the kitchen window. He was being addressed by Mum from the scullery, but he did not seem to be answering, or even to be listening to, the remarks which she was calling to him in a raised voice. He sat in an ordinary wooden kitchen chair in that brown and smoke-darkened room, and his head was lowered. He seemed to be thinking. His delicate lips were drawn, and when Anne saw him his eyelids were so far down that she at first thought his eyes must be shut. Yet at her coming Mortimer looked up, and smiled, as if with relief. Anne heard Mum say—

". . . these young chaps are always in such a hurry, Dad says. They don't want to wait for anything. They want everything at once. And so they jump at a thing, he says, and get tired of it the next minute, and break it. Dad says it's the age. He says since the War . . ."

"Mum!" called Anne in reply. "You forget that Mortimer's a 'young chap.'"

"Ah, but he's different!" cried Mum. "Don't you be cheeky!"

"What was she talking about?" asked Anne, in a low tone.

Mortimer stared at her as if he had not immediately understood her question.

"I . . . I don't know," he stammered, at last. "Something . . ." He spoke vaguely, as one in a dream. "Young men . . . marrying . . ."

"What was it, Mum?" asked Anne, going to the scullery, and plunging into the full tide of cooking. "You're stupefying Mortimer."

"I was telling him that Dad says he's done very wisely to choose a good wife——"

"Oh, but, Mum! How awful!" laughed Anne. "You really mustn't!" She was shocked at such propagandism.

"I was saying Dad says young people are in such a hurry nowadays. They don't wait to choose. They dash at it. Dad says they get married to anybody, and won't wait for anything."

"Has Mortimer told you he wants to get married at once?"

"At once!" exclaimed Mum, sharply setting down the pot she held. Her tone changed. It became earnest. "Why, Anne, dear . . ."

Mum stared straight at Anne, and Anne looked straight back at Mum. Neither said anything; and both, as they turned away from each other, sighed deeply. There was no more speech between Mum and Anne upon this subject; but Anne knew that Mum would return to it later. Her heart was distinctly the heavier for that knowledge.

V

Vera did not come in until very late. They heard her arrive, and then heard her stay long in the bedroom,

changing her dress. Presently she came slowly down the stairs, and more slowly still into the kitchen. Anne saw Mortimer rise to greet Vera. She saw Vera's white cheeks and dark eyes, her smile at Mortimer, the subsequent averting of her face from him in inexpressible coldness. Upon all their conversation fell a chill. Mortimer was silent, but sat at the table looking down at his plate, and eating little of what was upon it. Vera did not open her mouth to speak, and was like a little ghost. She was terribly thin. Her high cheek-bones showed clearly. Her lips were dry and her eyes bright. Mum, clouded still by the memory of Anne's confidence upon Mortimer's wish for early marriage, sat eating with a preoccupied air, one deep crease in her forehead, and her expression troubled.

What wonder that Anne felt slowly creeping over her a dismalness which was strange to her? She struggled hard against it; but the sight of the three people whom she loved best in the world all with the appearance of such coldness and wretchedness made her miserable. When she thought that this coldness and wretchedness seemed to be centred upon her own marriage, Anne almost wept. But she gave no sign of her emotion. She gave no sign of anything but tranquillity. It was not fit that she should obey her impulse, which was to jump up and burst into vehement tears. On the contrary.

"Well, as to Dad," said Anne, dealing first with Mum's obvious gloom. "When have we known him say what he meant? And when did he ever say anything we agreed with?"

"Never!" said Vera, quickly.

"Now, now!" reproved Mum. "I won't have you speak of your Dad in that way. He's had more experience than you have."

"What sort of experience?" demanded Anne.

"He's older."

"That's not considered much, nowadays," answered Anne. "The older you are, the more the young ones look down on you. Besides, Mum, you know very well that Dad gets his ideas from the papers. He doesn't *know* any young people except Mortimer and ourselves."

"And he doesn't know us!" interjected Vera. "Good gracious!"

"That's quite true," Anne agreed. "So I don't think you need worry about what Dad says, Mum. Put it out of your mind."

"Oh," said Mum. "It's not what Dad says I'm worrying about. It's what *you* say."

Vera was listening eagerly to this. She turned now upon Mum.

"*What* does Anne say?" she asked, her eyes glittering.

VI

Supper was over, and was cleared away; and Anne was wondering what they could do next when, looking suddenly at Vera, she saw that Vera was not standing quite upright. Vera, drooping yet lower, was groping for the chair behind her, her face absolutely white, and in her carriage so extraordinary an air of lassitude as to fill Anne with terror.

"Vera, dear!" exclaimed Anne, in a low voice. She stepped forward, full of concern. "Are you ill?"

Vera allowed the encircling arm. She even leant against Anne, as if she were so weary that this aid was necessary. Her weight against Anne was heavy, and her poor hanging head seemed to be without control. It rolled feebly from side to side.

"Funny," she murmured into Anne's ear, drowsily, so low as to be almost inaudible. "I'm so silly. I feel . . . I feel . . . quite . . ."

"Are you faint?" Anne could only ask this: the fact was evident.

The reply was a slow nod; but Vera's weight grew no less supportable. She was not really heavy. Only the inertness of her body distressed Anne. Anne drew her towards a chair. There was a moment of suspense, broken at last by a low-voiced question.

"Can I do anything?" It was Mortimer who spoke. It was to Anne that he spoke.

"Help me to get her upstairs."

But at Mortimer's approach Vera shrank away, as if she shuddered. Anne felt the close pressure of her body and the violent trembling which followed. Vera raised her hand to ward Mortimer away from herself.

"No, no!" she exclaimed, vehemently. "Not Mortimer. Not Mortimer. Mum will help."

"Mum," called Anne, without hesitation. To Mortimer, she whispered, "Never mind. Stay here," and turned Vera so that she could no longer see Mortimer. To her surprise, Vera struggled slightly, and, moving her head, for an instant regarded Mortimer with sorrow-laden eyes. Then her eyes were veiled.

"Poor Mortimer," said Vera, softly. "I didn't mean to hurt him. Poor Mortimer." The strain of her attention relaxed; she reeled against Anne, and almost fell. But by this time Mum was at hand, and she and Anne caught Vera and held her tightly. Together they led her from the room and slowly up to the bedroom, where they laid her upon the bed. Vera was still shuddering, her teeth chattering, as if she were seized with violent chill. Her cheeks were almost blue, and her eyes

stared upwards with an expression of such agony that Anne, chafing the cold hands, was appalled.

"Vera, my dearest," she whispered, bending low over the bed. Vera did not respond. She seemed without strength or energy. Still within her eyes was the same horror. But she did not shrink from Anne. Instead, she faintly replied, in a whisper that could hardly be heard:

"Send Mum . . . away." Anne heard.

"Could you get her some tea?" she asked Mum. "Or something—anything warm?" So much was in Vera's hearing. In addition, by signs, she indicated that Mum should send Mortimer for a doctor. Mum, meekly submitting to Anne's control, went away. Vera and Anne were thus alone together, Vera trembling still, but already less ill, and already more at ease. She lay quite quietly, and for a time there was a little silence. Anne was too frightened to speak; she was frightened and she kept her head. At last the silence was broken.

"I'm so sorry," murmured Vera, her teeth all the time chattering, so that the words were confused. "I'm so sorry. I've spoilt the evening. You wanted the evening to be so nice. I've spoilt it."

"You've spoilt nothing, dear," Anne told her, in a whisper. "Nothing at all. So you mustn't think that or worry about it. Just get well quick, and let's all be happy again."

Vera looked strangely at Anne.

"You're . . . so . . . awfully . . . good," she jumbled out. "I'm . . . such . . . a *beast*."

And with that she put out her two arms and convulsively pressed Anne's head against her own breast, crushing and bruising it with the sudden strength of her arms.

"Get better," whispered Anne, smiling into Vera's face as the close grip was at length relaxed. Vera's head was slowly and wretchedly shaken from side to side.

"I . . . don't . . . want . . . to," she murmured, in a broken voice of sorrow. And then, to Anne's inexpressible relief, tears came stealing out from Vera's eyes; heavy, languid tears that rolled down her cheeks and were lustrous in the twilight. "I . . . don't . . . want . . . to," groaned Vera again, whisperingly. But as she spoke some healing property within herself was touched, and the tears came freely.

"My duckie," murmured Anne, holding Vera now, and clasping her easily and sweetly, as if she had been a baby. "Cry, my duckie." She prayed that Vera might cry, might sleep. And all the time her perplexity increased. Minutes passed. Darkness gathered, deepening the shadows and bringing stillness into the room. Anne saw Vera trying to check the tears, trying to recover her self-control. A deep sigh shook her. One day, and soon, she would discover what Vera's grief was. How stupid she felt at having no clue to it! How stupid and helpless! But one day, and soon, she would discover it and cure it.

CHAPTER XIII: SHALLOWFORD

I

IT was the middle of summer. The village of Shallowford lay bleached by the sunlight. An old farm cart went creeping along the white, dusty road between two hills, with a slow rattle. Perched upon it was a dog, a shaggy white and black dog with affectionate eyes; the stolid horse, its head down, plodded thoughtfully, unguided, over the hard surface of the road, sending up strange puffs of dust from wherever its hoofs fell. From under the clumsy wheels spurts of dust also climbed lazily into the air, and fell, scattering unperceived. The dust had risen upon the horse's legs, whitening them, and two small clouds of flies buzzed around a bunch of grass which served the horse as a protective cap.

Nearer the village could be heard the clucking of hens, the occasional crowing of a cock, and the snorting of pigs. No other sound broke the stillness. The white road, now broken in two by deep shadow, ran curling between tiny, misshapen cottages, the curtains of which here and there were drawn to exclude the sun's fierceness. Above the village the sky was grey with heat, and the sun looked high and ferocious. Many of the cottages were whitewashed; some of them still had thatched roofs. Others were sturdily built of grey brick, with slate roofs; one or two were half-timbered and red-tiled. All seemingly lay asleep, quiet in the hot sunshine. One or two young children played in the village street, sitting upon high doorsteps, busy with dolls or stones or home-made toys; but even these children were slow moving and full of peace.

Presently there was a little cloud of dust from far away, and the distant humming of an automobile. The sound came nearer. It grew in volume. A small car, very dusty, went through the village, in its wake a rising volume of dust. The noise of the car's engine and the whirr of its tyred wheels diminished, grew faint, fainter, and at last became inaudible. The dust slowly fell back again to the road. All was as it had previously been. Only the snorting of pigs, the clucking of hens, and the occasional crow of a cock gave any indication of life in the village. Once more, within the shelter of the hills, Shallowford slept, at peace with the world.

II

Anne and Mortimer had arrived an hour before. They had been married that morning, at a Register Office; and they were in Sussex, far from Kilburn and from Kilburn's, buried deep in this sweet, softly moulded countryside. Anne still felt that her thin, golden wedding ring was a magnetic object, drawing every eye. It drew her own; and every time she caught sight of the ring her heart leapt a little. She loved Mortimer so dearly that she could not easily believe that she was married to him. It was still, as it had all along been, a beautiful faint vague dream. The few words spoken at the Register Office, the signing of a book, the perfunctory jocularity of the Registrar, had been negligible incidents in her dream, incapable of awakening the dreamer. She was unchanged. Mortimer was unchanged. He was Mortimer, as she was Anne. Yet Mortimer was now her husband, and she was a wife. The thought made Anne's breath catch; the tip of her nose tingled; she could not but feel that Shallowford was adorable in its sleepiness, that the day was the most lovely she had ever known,

that she could never in all her life be happier than she now was.

And Mortimer? He was a few feet away from her, in the sitting room of the Crown Inn, walking round amid its stuffiness, examining minutely the photographs and pictures which hung regimentally upon the walls, the ornaments and books and albums which stood everywhere, in every nook and upon every piece of furniture, making comments, half to himself, and half aloud to Anne, upon all he saw. And every now and then he would come over to her and kiss her lightly upon the cheek, not with an air of confidence, but as though he, too, were dreaming or feared that he might be dreaming, and as though he depended upon Anne for his reassurance. And whenever he did this the door of the sitting-room would be fumblingly opened, and the landlady or her help would come in with some addition to the meal which was being laid for Anne and Mortimer. Thus the happy moments raced away in the summer silence; and Anne, looking up as each fresh dish or jar or plate was added to the store already laid, smiled to see how the house was being cordially ransacked to give them pleasure. Nor for five minutes, Anne knew, had those at the inn doubted that the two of them were just married.

Meat, pickles, jams, salad, glasses, plates, bread, butter, cheese, fruit, a jug of water and a jug of beer stood upon the coarse white cloth covering the table. They jostled one another. There were so many things that the table was crowded. And every few minutes another contribution was made to the coming meal. All that was now awaited was a dish of vegetables. When that was ready, the bell which had been put beside one of the places would be given a little push to draw attention to it, and Mortimer and his wife would be alone together at last.

III

This morning, Vera being away at the seaside recovering from her late illness, Mum and Dad had dressed themselves in their best. They had gone with Anne to the Register Office, where Mortimer, in his best clothes, attended them. They had gone into a dark waiting room, where another couple (with friends) sat hand in hand waiting to be married. There had been whispering, facetiousness, and suspense. Then, as Mortimer grew paler and more distrait, the other couple had been led away to another room.

"It's like an 'ospital," whispered Mum to Anne. Mum was rather moist round the eyes. It was she who held Anne's hand, and clasped and pressed it for support every few minutes.

"What's that, Mum?" breathed Dad, bending across. They all crouched, vaguely troubled by their surroundings, awed, incapable of speaking in ordinary tones. Just so might they all have waited in Harley Street or for the return of a jury debating their verdict upon a capital charge.

At last it had been over. There had been a run for an omnibus; a waving to Mum and Dad while the heavy vehicle swayed further and further into the distance. A struggle at the railway station had flung them into a railway carriage in which moon-faced fellow-passengers stared for the whole journey; and at last, at a junction, they had had a half-dreary, half-exciting wait of half-an-hour. Even in the local train Anne and Mortimer had not been alone, because a boy had unwarily jumped into the carriage at the last moment, and had whistled uncomfortably under his breath during the slow trundle to the station for Shallowford. From that station Anne and Mortimer had ridden in a small cart which pretended to

be a vehicle for pleasure; and at the Crown, at last, they had found peace.

Their bedroom, above, possessed a similar sweet stuffiness to that of the dining-room, but it was without the smell of stale beer and tobacco smoke; its air of fresh, wind-dried bed-clothes and its funny woolly mats of hideous colours, its texts and angelic pictures, its oddness and old-fashioned furnishings, had immediately delighted Anne. Mortimer, tiptoeing about the room, had shown discomfort. He had looked mutely at Anne, and out of the window, which opened upon an orchard-like garden. He had washed his hands and face, to remove the dust of travel, without speaking. Together, in silence, they had looked out of the window at the apple-trees and the long grass, at a rough swing and a far-distant chicken-house. When Anne, resuming her hat, had tilted it at him, and had said: "It's all lovely, isn't it?" Mortimer had kissed her, replying: "*You* are," but had made no other comment. He was pale; his lips were tightly compressed; there was excitement, coldness, fever in his demeanour. He could not look at Anne.

From that time until the present, the two of them, treading stealthily down the narrow stairs, had been waiting for lunch in the inn's small sitting room. There was dried grass in the fireplace, a stuffed bird upon the mantelpiece, and an undustable number of nick-nacks everywhere else in the room. There was a miserable piano, with stale comic-songs and dance tunes lying upon it. There were two uncomfortable armchairs, and there was a country stuffiness and crowdedness and tastelessness about it all. And in spite of all this, and because of it, Anne's heart was full of joy and her spirits were high. With her, all was at this instant well. She could picture nothing in life but supreme contentment.

IV

Their luncheon eaten, they stepped out into the garden. and found two chairs set at a rickety table under one of the apple trees. Here they sat while Mortimer smoked, and Anne, listening intently, exulted in the sweet silence. She was so accustomed to the roar of London, which was always in her ears until she slept and as soon as she awoke in the morning, that this country stillness, with the faint summer chattering of birds in the orchard, was entrancing. In such drowsy calm every sound had its value; and as they spoke they lowered their voices to a hush. Of any activity within the house they could hear nothing; at a distance the occasional clucking of chickens was all that broke the general quiet.

Mortimer did not touch Anne as they sat here. He sometimes flicked the smouldering ash from his cigarette and anon looked up into the tree above their heads, as if he too were entranced by this lovely peace. There, among the sparse foliage, were half-ripened apples; and beyond them the hot, gleaming sky. A thousand scents of fruit and grass and earth, all warm with the day's heat, but cooled by the shade, gave Anne a feeling of rapture. She sat conscious of all outward things, smiling upon the world, her heart as warm as the breeze.

V

So the day passed. After tea, when the air was cooler, they went for a walk upon the white road, and up on to one of the hills. And as they went higher the breeze grew in strength, fluttering upon Anne's cheeks and making her raise her head in welcome to it. From the crest of the hill she saw stretched far below an open plain, rich with corn and pasture, the fields fringed—as if for-

mally—with trees, and little villages scattered upon the surface of the plain. At this height the whole broad stretch of the land seemed to be patterned, as though nature and man together in this great weald had vowed a pact to preserve beauty immaculate. It flashed in Anne's mind that cities were places where beauty was not so much diseased or banished as atrophied. She took Mortimer's arm.

"I wish we could live in the country," said Anne. "I suppose we can't."

"You'd tire of it," Mortimer rejoined. "You'd get used to it. In five years you wouldn't trouble to climb this hill."

Anne shook her head.

"Not I," she said. "I don't tire."

Mortimer looked at her strangely.

"You're very fortunate," he commented, half under his breath.

Still holding his arm, Anne turned and looked into Mortimer's face. A faint shiver ran through her, at his words and at his tone. Then—

"I think it's growing cold up here," she said. "Let's go back."

They began to descend the hill. The sun was glowing redly from the west, still very hot, but less brilliant than it had been. Below them lay Shallowford—as small and pretty a village as any they had seen from the hill-top. It rested sweetly among the hills, shaded only by fruit trees and one or two others of more generous foliage, compact, simple, and fast asleep. They could see the clustered roofs, and a white wall, and the winding road running from one far distance into the other. The road was quite clear. Some cattle were gathered at a gate near the road, and one or two of them from time to time bellowed mournfully, as if to hasten the cowherd.

Shadows were lengthening. One side of one of the hills was already lustreless; its neighbour was brilliant, as if it had been drenched in gold.

VI

Evening came, and after supper Anne and Mortimer sat again under the trees in the orchard. Anne's mind, as she rested in the cool, sweet evening air, was full of thoughts of home, of Mum and Dad and Vera. She wondered if Vera would get well again; she could picture Mum in the kitchen, and Dad at work. In her happiness Anne was ready to feel that the little ugly house which during nearly the whole of her life had been her home could claim a kind of beauty. But it was the beauty of long use and of association, as she well knew, and not a beauty of design or surrounding or spirit. Compared with the lovely restfulness of this apple-laden garden, it was—not horrible, because it held so many memories—but ugly and cramped and inconvenient beyond the ordinary. Would Dad, Anne wondered, mischievously, when he retired, and when all his insurances matured, give up his little house, and live in the country? It was unthinkable! Without knowing that she did so, Anne shook her head.

"What?" asked Mortimer, as if to coax a confession.

Anne looked slowly up, smiling as she realised that he must have been watching her.

"All sorts of things," she told him. "A jumble. I was wondering if Dad would ever come to live in the country."

"Good heavens, no," interjected Mortimer, almost contemptuously.

"I don't expect so. I can't imagine Dad ever leaving our home."

"Our home?"

"*His* home." Anne laughed. "I'm very sorry. D'you think there's any chance of your ever being transferred to a country branch of the bank?"

Mortimer looked worried. Anne knew his expressions so well that she could recognise them at the first onset.

"I don't know," he said, slowly,—it seemed unwillingly. "It depends on old Harris. He and I don't get on very well."

"Oh, Mortimer!" exclaimed Anne, concerned.

"I'll tell you some time . . ." He thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, and cast down his head in thought. For some time there was unbroken silence while Mortimer brooded.

Anne waited a little while. The light was slowly dying. Shadows were no longer shadows, but were merging already into twilight. There was a chill in the breeze.

"Shall we walk about the garden?" she said, at last.

Mortimer rose. Together they walked over the grass, and out, through a gate which they found open, into a narrow lane which they had not previously observed. Its hedges, rising much above their heads, made the lane darker than the garden, and as Anne and Mortimer strolled along between these high hedges night covered the earth. A moon, not very old, was in the sky, shining clearly; and when they came to another gate the two leant upon it and gazed across the fields. A fine white mist was to be seen across some of them, like a gauze veil, a curious and mysterious sight which was new to them both.

And as they stood thus, moved by the wandering breeze and the faint mist and the moon and the delicious enveloping darkness, they drew together. Mortimer's arm was thrown around Anne, and his face was very near, magnetic and full of light. Instinctively, Anne approached her own cheek to his, and they kissed, not once

only, but several times, very sweetly, and at last with eagerness. Anne could feel Mortimer trembling slightly; and his arms tightened their hold, until they held her unescapably. Almost with fierceness, Mortimer kissed her again, and Anne, her eyes wide open, her lips parted for the kiss, suffered her body for the first time to relax in his arms. She felt no excitement, but she was quick with love for him, so that her one impulse was to give freely from the unexhaustible treasure of her love.

PART THREE: VERA

CHAPTER XIV: AN AMBUSH

I

"DEAR Madam," said Mr. Harrow, balancing himself with one foot upon the rung of a chair. "Adverting to your favour of the third instant, we beg to inform you, er . . ."

He read again the letter he was answering. Drearily Vera stared at the black shape of her typewriter, and at the red ruling of her shorthand note-book. She was hardly listening to Mr. Harrow, but was mechanically accepting his dictation. There was so tragic a sense of boredom in her heart that she could not keep still. Only by constraining herself, by concentrating upon some one or other of the customary objects which stood at hand, could she express her quivering impatience. When Mr. Harrow resumed the letter Vera bent her head and wrote swiftly until his voice wavered and stopped.

". . . we beg to inform you," said Mr. Harrow, "that we have made inquiries concerning the unfadable curtain material of the manufacturers of the same, who inform us . . . who . . . who instruct us that they are unable to match the sample which you . . . which you were good enough to . . . er, send us, and that they . . . What did I say, Miss Treacher?"

Obediently, Vera read aloud from her notes. Mr. Harrow, having heard the long sentence, repeated some of it under his breath, and grasped its purport.

". . . and that they . . ." he continued, "would suggest your using the cloth we enclose a sample of for your consideration and approval. Full stop. The manufacturers recommend this material, and guarantee it to be sun-proof, and if it should meet with your approval . . . your approbation . . ."

Mr. Harrow paused. He was silent for quite a long time. At last he said, in a lower voice——

"Aren't you feeling well?"

Vera started at his change of tone, and looked up over her shoulder. Mr. Harrow's long face was the longer in sympathy. His grey eyes were benevolent and concerned. They were very bright, clear eyes, a little prominent.

"Quite well," she answered, in a similarly low voice, a frown starting to her brow.

"Your hand's trembling. I can see it," said Mr. Harrow, confidentially.

With an effort, Vera stilled the passive hand.

"I'm quite well," she repeated, with a slight impatience. "Rather tired, that's all."

"Would you like a rest?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Harrow," said Vera, steadily.

He proceeded with his dictation. But that single-noted, rasping voice of Mr. Harrow's had been sunk, and the unexpected sympathy in it had made Vera emotional. Behind the superficial attention which she gave to the letters, was a state of panic.

II

Miss Smart was reflectively replacing a hairpin. Her eyes were demurely downcast. She had the air of one who could say a good deal if she had a mind to it. Upon her lips was the faintest of smiles. When Vera noticed these things with fresh, heightened clairvoyance, she also

noticed, as she had never done before, that the tip of Miss Smart's nose was always rather pink nowadays. The pink rims of Miss Smart's eyes were accentuated. One saw them because her lashes were exceptionally light. She was slowly bleaching. The freckles under her eyes were so clustered as to make almost continuous discolouration. There were new wrinkles and saggings in the skin of her neck. Vera suddenly realised that Miss Smart was much older than she had supposed. She was beginning to look as though her diet was entirely vegetarian—her skin bloodless. She was thinner; her knuckles were sharp, and the line of her chin was hard. Miss Smart must be nearly forty. The hot summer weather was beginning to affect her. She would never look really old, because she was sandy; but she would grow thinner and thinner, and more and more acid. Vera shuddered at the thought of Miss Smart, ungenerous and unkind, envious and full of malice.

And then she wondered whether Miss Smart's dislikeable characteristics might not be due to the state of her health. Perhaps Miss Smart had some illness that was bleaching her and eating away her softness. Suffering had so heightened Vera's own irritability, and it had so magnified the distresses of her days, that she was ready for a moment to suppose Miss Smart one who had been as harshly treated by fate as herself. But as she had this handsome conception Vera looked again at Miss Smart, and her dislike returned unchecked and augmented. Miss Smart could never have been nice. She must always have been unkind and envious. At children's games she must have "passed remarks," watched other children, and taken their toys or sneered at their pleasures. At school she must have been artful, tale-telling. Whenever she could do so, she must have taken advantage of her more scrupulous or more innocent

elders, pushed young children aside and down, scampered off to avoid punishment for her treacherous unkindness. And so, Vera was confident, as she had grown older without inspiring love, she had become fixed in her present nature. To Miss Smart the base thing and the ugly thing were more true than the beautiful thing. She believed only in base motives, and imputed them wherever it was possible to do so. She sat there now, smiling acidly and satirically. She had been watching Vera and Mr. Harrow, and had all the time been jealous. Possibly she had overheard—or if she had not overheard she had guessed—the purport of their low-toned conversation. She looked as if she were pretending to be very amused—pretending to herself, to her inexhaustible vanity, while her true thoughts ran hideously in secret channels.

Vera averted her eyes. She could not bear any longer to think of Miss Smart.

She went on thinking of her own disaster. She must get away from London. It was impossible to tell how this flight was to be accomplished; but she could not stay here now that Mortimer was married to Anne. That would mean that she would constantly meet him, or be where he had been—a never ceasing agony which she could not bear. If she could leave London, and go right away, out of England, far from all that reminded her of grief, she might escape from these encounters, these prying minds which tortured her. But she must go at once. At once! It was necessary, although she did not foresee any sequel. How to go? That was Vera's next problem. It was so difficult to do anything without Anne to advise her. She could not tell Anne that she was going. Anne would guess the reason. She marvelled that Anne had not already guessed a reason for her strange behaviour. She must go immediately, alone, without telling anybody that she was going. It was the only thing to be done.

For the alternatives—there were two—she had not the courage. She could neither take her own life nor endure her present surroundings with stoicism. Even as she decided so resolutely upon flight, there ran through Vera the terrible whirring hysterical feeling of being trapped. She was trapped and shackled. Terror seized her.

"Clack-clacka-clacka" went the other typewriters. All together, they made a clattering rattle. Vera saw Miss Westgate push back with harassed preoccupation the heavy flounce of fawn-coloured hair which she wore over her brow. Miss Westgate was in a difficulty. She could not read her own shorthand notes. She now tried from all angles—cocking her head, withdrawing, approaching, and at the same time blinking very hard—to decipher the mysterious word by which she was confounded. A look of gloom settled upon her face. Her mouth turned down at the corners. She sniffed. "Clacka-clack" tapped Miss Ellis's machine; "clacka-clack-clack-clacka . . ." Vera was as busy as the others. "Adverting to your favour of the third instant, we beg to inform you . . ."

She was vaguely aware of Miss Westgate rising and going to Miss Smart with her notebook. The two of them whispered. Vera went on mechanically, although her hands quivered and her mind was torn. It was inevitable. ". . . of the manufacturers of the same, who instruct us . . ." Mortimer, Mortimer, Mortimer, said her thoughts. ". . . they are unable to match the sample . . ." said her fingers.

Miss Smart was shaking her head. She too pored upon the notebook. Vera heard the murmur: "Ask *her* . . ." Both Miss Smart and Miss Westgate were observing her as she typed, apparently waiting for the precise moment at which she could safely be approached. And, as if in that slight raising of Vera's head she had seen her

opportunity, Miss Westgate plunged across the room to Vera's desk. She hung in limp and wobegone fashion above Vera, holding out her notebook with distaste as she might have held an object barbed or poisonous. Miss Westgate's voice was soft and grizzling.

"Miss Treacher, can you read this? I can't read my notes. Look, this word. It looks like an upward 'r,' and a 't,' and a 'shon' hook . . ."

With Miss Westgate's heavy breathing in her ear, Vera bent over the shorthand notebook, conscious of prolonged scrutiny upon the part of Miss Smart. She could not read the pencilled outlines clearly, because they were so badly and carelessly formed. But her eyes, for another reason also, were blurred and almost sightless. It was a moment before she could give her mind to this trivial problem, so immersed was she in her own anguish. Miss Westgate pointed tentatively, her pencil sometimes against her teeth and sometimes against the common paper of her notebook, to the words in her notes which immediately preceded that one which had caused her trouble.

"It's awfully annoying," she murmured. "Mr. Belper speaks so indistinctly, and he rushed me so . . ."

"Reduction," said Vera, quickly, seeing the outline at last through a mist.

"Ah!" cried Miss Westgate, and waved her book in triumph. She beamed upon Vera. "Thanks so much. 'Reduction,' Miss Smart," she called. They all smiled and nodded, with the exception of Miss Ellis, who had not noticed that anything was amiss. "Clack-clack-clack-clack" went Miss Ellis's machine. Soon the noise of it was drowned by the thunder of the three other typewriters as they volleyed their letters. For a time there was no sound in the room but the steady din of typing, typing, typing. It made a bitter accompaniment to Vera's

more bitter journey into the world of vivid memory. Mortimer! Mortimer!

III

At teatime Mr. Harrow and Mr. Belper came into the room and unbent. Mr. Belper was telling prodigious stories of the selectness of his tennis-club, and how some outsider had vainly tried to join it. He described this brazen fellow in some detail; and showed how beautifully the interloper had been foiled.

"Son of a greengrocer," he said, with a short laugh of contempt. "Huh! Lord, the sauce of these devils. You see, he thought that because he'd had a commission during the war he could push in anywhere. I happen to know that he only got the commission by a bit of wire-pulling. I happen to know that, you see. I mean,—straight from the stable, so to speak. He's an absolute outsider. So my wife went round to the secretary—awfully swell woman—a Mrs. Fawcett-Jones—and told the tale. But the secretary knew it all already. She showed my wife the letters. His letters and her letters—the funniest thing you ever heard. This chap wrote as if he was a duke at least. But he'd met his match in Mrs. Fawcett-Jones. She'd told him at first that the club was restricted, select, and all that. He didn't see it. Thought his money was as good as anybody else's.—But the funny part of it was——"

"Yes, but look here," said Mr. Harrow, reflectively. "My father was a bootmaker. He's retired now; but would they keep *me* out because of that?"

"No, ole man," said Mr. Belper, energetically. "No, ole man. This chap's a thorough bounder. Now, I'll tell you a thing——"

"I didn't have a commission in the war," said Mr.

Harrow, in a meditative voice. "I never went out of England."

"I know that," murmured Mr. Belper, uncomfortably. "I know all that."

"Pickin' up scraps on a pointed stick, like a park-keeper, I was."

"Yes, I know," Mr. Belper urged. "Like a lot of other soldiers."

"But what awful cheek of the man," laughed Miss Smart, elaborately ignoring Mr. Harrow's grumbled war-reminiscences. "Those sort of people have got most awful cheek. What did you say his father was? Fishmonger? Fried fish and chips?" Miss Smart laughed again, with a shiver of distaste. She was very amused.

"What does it matter what his father was?" asked Vera; but so quietly that only Mr. Harrow heard the words. He addressed her in reply.

"I'm glad you said that," he said, for Vera's ear alone. "I thought perhaps it mattered to you what a man's father was."

"It doesn't," returned Vera. "I've never thought about it. Why should it?"

"Exactly," said Mr. Harrow. "Only some people——"

"Most of the people who are any good started at the bottom. It's something in themselves——"

"You know, I'm proud of my old dad," continued Mr. Harrow, with a grateful look. "He's a rare old boy. Not much education, you know, and some funny ways. But one of the best. I'd like you to meet him . . ." Vera started, and made no reply. Mr. Harrow rather hurriedly diverted his conversation. "I've got an idea that your tennis club's got a lot of swankers in it, Belper," he said, in a louder voice.

"Swankers?" protested Mr. Belper. "Oh, here, I *say!*"

"I mean, all these people who aren't good enough to join. . . . Where *are* they to play? They pay the rates and taxes the same as we do. Some of them pay more. What's the matter with 'em? It's prehistoric!"

"Well, ole man . . ." began Mr. Belper, explanatorily.

"I suppose there are some people who'd call *your* little lot no class, aren't there?"

"I'd like to see them!" retorted Mr. Belper. He gave a scornful laugh. "I got no use for snobs."

"There's snobs in every class, my boy," said Mr. Harrow. "There's snobs right down and right up. People talk a lot about being democratic, and all that; but just look round a bit, and see how it works. If a man's been to a good school he looks down on a man who hasn't. He can't help it. He feels he knows such a devil of a lot——"

"O-oh!" cried the girls—at the word "devil."

"Beg pardon, ladies. Well, he thinks he knows pretty well everything. Doesn't he, now? And if a man's father has been in a large way of business he looks down on the smaller man. If it's birth it's birth; and money it's money; and education it's education; and brains . . . And you look down on the greengrocer——"

"I don't look down on anybody!" protested Mr. Belper. "No, Harrow, you've——"

"I never met anybody who looks *up*. The man who hasn't been to a good school looks down on the man who *has*, because he doesn't think much of school education. He thinks life's the only good school. And so on. I'm a man like that myself."

Mr. Belper made one or two attempts to speak. Vera, looking round at the girls, saw that they were puzzled by Mr. Harrow's speech. The appreciative smiles with which they were accustomed to greet all male remarks

were shrouded. They even exchanged glances among themselves. The ground was so very delicate! A bootmaker—they hoped it was in a large way!

"Well, I see I've said too much," said Mr. Harrow, at last; and his hands went to the limply hanging lapels of his coat. His face lost animation, and became again long and creased. "Yes, I've said too much. I'm as bad as any of them; only bottom side upmost. Come along, Belper."

The two of them went, Belper expostulating in a hoarse whisper. When the girls were alone, Miss Smart gave a derisive snigger.

"What a tornado!" she observed, titteringly. "Quite a lecture! That's what comes of being a bootmaker's son. I've always heard cobblers were radicals! Now we know *why!*"

IV

Vera felt a quick flush of anger rise to her cheeks at Miss Smart's comment; but she checked protest. Whatever she might say in reply to Miss Smart would have no effect, she knew, upon Miss Smart's character. On the contrary, Miss Smart's ridicule would fall upon herself. Yet she was angry with Miss Smart, because Mr. Harrow's lecture had impressed her. She liked Mr. Harrow the better for it. Vera's mind flew back to the reference Mr. Harrow had made to his father, and to her own silence in reply to his timid half-invitation. She became troubled at her own unkindness.

"Poor Mr. Harrow," she thought. "He's so ugly and bony and common . . ."

The common strain in his rasping voice offended her. The boniness of his hands, and the sense that his thumbs were flexible; his cadaverous cheeks and baldness; his

awkwardness; the pale geniality of his manner; his long coat with the hanging folds—all these were items in Vera's unanalysed catalogue of Mr. Harrow's imperfections. The rasping voice came from between thin and shapeless lips; Mr. Harrow's nose was prominent and slightly awry; he carried with him always the faint odour of tobacco. These things were offensive to Vera, whose touch was extremely fastidious. He was so *ordinary;* so much like thousands of other young men she saw every day. A stick and a pipe, a morning paper and one in the evening, a ring on one finger, large hands and feet, a practical common-sense mind without a touch of poetry or fancy, but plodding, painstaking. . . . His bony shoulders, his creased cheeks, the putty greyness of his face—all inexpressive, all common. The rasp, rasp, rasp of his tired, unmodulated voice. And yet: "Poor Mr. Harrow." He was so ugly and bony and common, like a horse in a baker's cart, jog-trotting along the roads with its head down, patient and uninteresting. Poor Mr. Harrow!

V

She meant: "So different from Mortimer!" but she did not say the words even in thought. It was not necessary to do so. Vera had no need to make the comparison. Mr. Harrow's inability to bear it was too palpable.

She spent the time between tea and the end of the day in typing and in dreaming. Sometimes, when she pictured Mortimer with Anne, imagination made her tremble violently, made her flush and pale twenty times in a moment. She could see and feel so clearly—could see the glance, the turn of the head which made Mortimer so attractive; could so intensely feel the touch of his hand and cheek—that her yearning was terrible to bear. At such moments Vera was stifled, breathless and full of

vehement horror. Then, mercifully, her picturings would fade. She would again become aware of the room in which she sat, of the three other girls who were in the room with her. She would recover self-control, and fall once more to her work. "Clack-clack-clack-clacka-clack." "We beg to thank you for your kind remark in regard to the assistance we were able to give you in the matter . . ." They were together now, happy; while she . . . "Any further assistance which we may be able to render . . ."

At last the day was over. There was the grinding tinny pang-rattle-pang of the typewriter-covers as they were replaced for the night; a scramble for the little dressing room and the one mirror. Miss Smart powdered the tip of her nose, and said "Good night, dear," to Miss Westgate. She was gone like a fairy, all youthful springs and dartings. All now was quick, with urgent slamming of doors, jingling of keys, and the rest of the evening dash. And at last came the swift journey through the clerks' office, which was already empty, and between the long, high desks, past open doors, to the staircase. Everybody had gone home. The building was like a museum, deserted and echoing.

Vera ran down the stairs into the street as fast as she could. She was eager to escape from every eye, bent upon being alone. She kept her head down, and her hands were tightly gripped. Now that she was out of the office she could give freedom to her thoughts. She need conceal them no longer. Already Vera's lips drooped, and her eyes were darker and darker with the tears which remained unshed.

She was among tall buildings and shops, bewildered by loud and swiftly moving traffic which filled the air with clamour, beset by hurrying people who all seemed bent upon pushing against her and hustling her as they rushed

homewards. The evening was overcast. Clouds were gathering, and a chill wind had arisen. It whipped her thin dress, her white cheeks. Vera walked rapidly, ignoring the buffets of the sightless and impatient crowd, and lost in the press of humans, still holding her head down, and facing the breeze.

"Miss Treacher . . ."

It was Mr. Harrow. He was at her side, walking at Vera's pace, inescapable. She might have known.

VI

Vera could not restrain a movement of recoil. Her heart sank. Mr. Harrow was the least welcome companion she could have had at this moment. He took his place near her and managed to keep it in spite of the thick, hurrying crowd which drove headlong against them both. They were in a main thoroughfare at a time when all offices were emptying. The noisy omnibuses rushing by were brimming with passengers; every teashop caused an eddy because those who sought to leave it encountered those who sought to enter and those who sought to pass. All were strangely frantic and thoughtless. Girls walked arm in arm, three abreast; young men wound and sprinted among those less nimble than themselves; everything was confusion. Mr. Harrow, keeping pace with Vera by means of long and menacing strides, lowered his head almost to a level with hers.

"I say," he went on, with his Cockney twang, "I hope you won't mind my catching you up like this; but I . . . er . . . I wanted to speak to you a minute."

To have rebuffed such humility would have been cruel, even though the words had been almost shouted in her ear. But Vera was overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

"I'm in a tremendous hurry to get home," she shouted back at him.

"I know. I'll walk with you just a step or two. If you don't mind. Let's cross here. It's less savage across the street." As they crossed, he added, in a lower tone: "It's . . . it's about yourself. Er . . ."

They were now less jostled. The crowd was less dense, and the shops were shuttered. For a moment Mr. Harrow seemed to lose his nerve, and to be quite at a loss for words with which to continue his amiable discourse.

"I'm really quite well," protested Vera. "It's very kind of you, Mr. Harrow; but I wish you wouldn't . . ."

"Well, I don't want to be a nuisance," pleaded Mr. Harrow, jostling against her in his nervousness. He was very modest, and not at all pushful or impertinent. He could not be treated brusquely. Indeed, his face was so kind that Vera was touched.

"You're not a nuisance," she said. "You're very good. Only——" It was impossible to tell him that he offended her by being bony and ugly and common; that stale pipes were horrible, and large, strong hands . . .

"You see, you don't look well," interrupted Mr. Harrow. "Don't look happy."

Tears started to Vera's eyes. Happy! But she smiled at him. He looked so funny and angular, and in his top-hat so tall and shop-walkerish; and yet that long, liverishly-creased face was so concerned and full of well-wishing that Vera liked him, and was grateful to him. She looked straight before her, trying to put out of her head all distaste for his physical appearance.

"I'm not awfully happy," she said, candidly. "But it isn't anything——"

"Couldn't I do something?" Mr. Harrow begged.

"I'm afraid not," said Vera, quite definitely, and shook

her head. The mere thought was an outrage to her sensitiveness. He was a stranger.

"Not take you out, or anything?"

"No." She framed the word. It was not spoken. She hid the distaste that sprang to her eyes. Ashamed of her distaste, she faltered: "It's . . . aw—awfully kind."

"I wouldn't bother you, you know," pleaded Mr. Harrow. "Just do it . . . give you a change. Try!" He was bending down, trying to see her face.

"No," said Vera, the more hardly because self-control was difficult. "I couldn't. It wouldn't be any good."

Mr. Harrow grew suddenly red.

"I don't want . . . want to bother you," he stammered. "Only . . . You know what I mean . . . Bit of a change does everybody good . . ."

"Not . . . It's not what I need, Mr. Harrow."

They had reached the stopping point for Vera's omnibus, and she looked desperately to see if a bus was near. Mr. Harrow had still the red face she had noticed. She could not look up at his eyes, which were fixed upon her with great intenseness.

Her cheeks also were hot. Her lips were dry. She forgot the crowd, and the evening; she forgot even Mortimer in the extreme embarrassment of this moment.

"Won't you try it?" urged Mr. Harrow.

"I can't. I can't," Vera exclaimed, torn with distress.

"I wish you would." Even in pleading, Mr. Harrow's voice was harsh.

Still she shook her head. Her omnibus swung round the corner. It lurched to a standstill, with a struggling tail of would-be passengers hanging to the brass rails and jumping on with one foot.

"This is mine!" cried Vera, with thankfulness. "Good night, Mr. Harrow. And thank you. Thank you.

You're kind . . ." She stepped forward, Mr. Harrow's hand not yet releasing hers, which she had given him in impulsive gratitude and relief.

"Think it over," Mr. Harrow said in her ear. "I won't take 'no.'"

Vera knew that. The conviction had long been within her consciousness. Mr. Harrow never took "no." It made her quiver to realise this afresh, made her move swiftly, stricken by panic. Was it not enough to be broken-hearted?

A moment later Vera was safe from Mr. Harrow. She saw him, tall, hatless, and still flushed, as the omnibus moved away. He had not taken "no." He was persistent and unshakeable. Bony and strong and common. . . . She gazed far out over the rail of the bus, turning her shoulder to the woman who sat beside her. In her throat there was a sob that she could no longer control; and in her eyes were tears which no effort could restrain. They trickled down her cheeks, salt to her lips, and bitter to her spirit. The enormous red omnibus swayed onwards between the shops and buildings. In the distance could be heard the low rumble of thunder. Above, the sky was very black, very threatening. Vera's head sank lower; her shoulders betrayed the secret which she was trying to conceal.

CHAPTER XV: ASSAULT

I

ALL the morning Mr. Harrow had not looked at Vera. He had dictated letters to her in a way which showed that he was trying to make her feel at ease; but never once had they exchanged a glance. She was conscious of Mr. Harrow standing behind her, of his seriousness. . . . It seemed that sometimes he was a little more involved than usual in his dictation, but he finished very quickly and went away. Before he was quite outside the door Vera saw Miss Smart look at her wrist watch, smile to herself, and go over and whisper to Miss Westgate. Miss Smart, then, had not failed to observe that Mr. Harrow had finished his letters sooner than he was in the habit of doing. She appeared to be much diverted.

"I can't stay. I can't stay. I can't bear it," thought Vera. She placed paper in her machine, but she could not see clearly. Her fingers were clumsy. They trembled. Only the knowledge that Miss Smart was watching from behind her light lashes enabled Vera to go on working. She looked fixedly at the typewriter, at the paper; she forced herself to read accurately the unsteady outlines which represented what Mr. Harrow had said.

"Dear Madam. Reference your favour concerning bedspread, we regret you should have cause to complain of same. We are taking the matter up with the manufacturers, and as soon as we receive a reply from them we will communicate with you further. Assuring you of our best attention at all times . . ."

What a mercy the phrases were so familiar!

And now Miss Smart and Miss Westgate and Miss Ellis were all busy. They could not see her face. They could not watch her. It was Miss Smart Vera minded; not the others. Miss Westgate had a far kinder nature. . . . Miss Westgate still wore no engagement ring; but she seemed quite happy. What had happened to her love affair? What happened to any of them out of office hours? Mysterious, mysterious people. Perhaps they, too, had sorrows? Vera shook her head wearily. She could not credit such a fancy. Not one of them could feel as she felt. Not one of them had the power to feel. They might have small anxieties, small distresses; but they did not suffer. Arrogantly, Vera surveyed the unconscious girls, thinking of them all as unlovely and unlovable.

Was she herself, then, lovable? With fierce energy she suppressed a sob.

II

The day went on as every day had gone since Vera's happiness had been destroyed. Hour after hour passed, and every hour seemed to grow longer than the one which had gone before it. Sometimes Vera would look at her watch a dozen times in an hour, always with amazement that time had travelled so slowly. Gradually a kind of lethargy stole upon her, as if she had been drugged. In such a mood as she now reached there was no longer any acute pain, but only a dead despondency. Heavily Vera did the work that she was called upon to do, without interest and without intelligence. Only a part of her mind was working: the rest was paralysed.

At tea-time Mr. Harrow and Mr. Belper stayed a few

moments only. Mr. Harrow drank his tea, took away some letters, and was gone in a couple of minutes. Mr. Belper, disconcerted by the loss of his comrade, found himself no match for four young women. He, too, stammeringly departed, to the surprise of Miss Smart and her friends.

"Ha. Short and sweet," murmured Miss Smart, upon the flight of Mr. Belper. "What's upset the two of them? Anybody any idea?" She stared at Vera as she spoke. "Seems odd. Did you notice the way Harrow skedaddled as soon as he'd drunk his tea?"

"I expect he's sorry for what he said yesterday," answered Miss Westgate. "He *was* rather strong then, you know. Perhaps he's ashamed."

"Shouldn't wonder," agreed Miss Smart. "They talk about women being funny; but men are ten times funnier, if you ask me. Just look at Belper. . . . He was in a perfect flurry to get away from us. Did he think we'd eat him?"

They all laughed at the notion that Mr. Belper was afraid of them.

"He looked terrified," said Miss Ellis, copying Miss Smart.

They laughed again.

"Oh, well," suggested Miss Westgate. "I expect they'll have got over it by to-morrow. But men *are* funny. You know, they take you up wrong . . . and get sulky. They get like that for days on end—not quarrelling with you, but like a bear with a sore head."

"It's *quite* true," observed Miss Ellis. "Quite. As if they wanted you to apologise for something. And it's generally something quite tiny, too."

"Oh, they're mad. They're all mad," cried Miss Smart. "I've got no patience with them. Lords of creation, in-

deed!" She laughed satirically. "It was a man who gave them that name, I expect. Or else a woman who wanted to flatter them. You can do a lot by flattery."

"I think it's so funny," said Miss Ellis, "the way they want you to . . . well, encourage them. And then, if you do it, they get frightened. D'you know what I mean? I think *every* girl has to do the proposing, nearly."

"Yes, but not to be caught doing it," said Miss Smart, drily.

"No. That's what I mean," explained Miss Ellis. "They're so shy."

"Oh, it's shyness, is it!" jeered Miss Smart.

"I think it's the artful girls who get on best with men," put in Miss Westgate. "My cousin—the one that lives at Sutton. She's been engaged three or four times. She pretends she's so sympathetic—ooh, she *is* a little cat. She pretends she's sympathetic, and the men fall for it every time."

"Big stupids!" said Miss Smart, contemptuously. "Give them fluffy hair, and baby eyes, and a lot of idiotic kid's ways; and that's what they love. Goo-goo eyes, and nothing to say, and the men are all over you. They don't want brains or sense——"

"No; they want to be led on, encouraged," interrupted Miss Ellis. "Only they mustn't feel you're too easy."

"I think they're shy," cried Miss Westgate. "What Miss Ellis says. They get cold. They want to be nice, and all that; and they can't think what to say. That makes them sort of—oh, I don't know—sort of freezing. And then *you* freeze, and it's all miserable."

"And then *you* freeze!" Vera was listening. She did not make any comment. The conversation died away. "Sort of freezing. And then *you* freeze." Her mind fastened upon those words. "And then *you* freeze, and it's all miserable."

III

"But not all men," thought Vera. "Not men like Mr. Harrow." No. Mr. Harrow was different. But other men . . . were they like that? Was what Miss Westgate had said true? Miss Westgate evidently spoke from experience. "And then *you* freeze." Your heart froze. . . . Your brain was numbed, and your heart froze.

So greatly affected was Vera's mind by what she had overheard that she awoke suddenly to the bustle of home-going at the end of the day. She was still at her desk, looking through a calendar which she kept in order to remind Mr. Harrow of appointments, engagements, and other business promises, when she heard the sharp clangour of typewriter-covers, and found the day at an end. It was too late for her to spring up and leave the building with the others, as she had planned to do. They would be ready and gone before she had washed. The alternative was to take her time, make her preparations slowly, and go out when Mr. Harrow, if he were waiting, had tired of his vigil. The doorkeeper would always let her out. Therefore, instead of hastening, Vera finished her task in a leisurely manner and was a quarter of an hour after the others. She saw in the mirror a rather miserable smile at thought of such a stratagem. Poor Mr. Harrow, if he should be waiting. Poor ugly, bony, common Mr. Harrow.

The face distorted by this expression became instantly grave. Solemnly, Vera looked at herself in the glass. She noticed her hair and the even brows. But when she came to the eyes and mouth she received a shock.

"Oh, no wonder she stares!" The words were spoken aloud. For indeed, Vera's face was deadly white, and dark rings surrounded her eyes. The lips drooped wretchedly. "I'm tired. It's that I'm tired . . ." But she did not believe herself.

Hurrying now, she left the mirror, shut the drawer of her desk, drew on her gloves. And then her heart began to beat faster, for she heard a footstep in the clerks' office. A warmth flew to her cheeks. She knew quite well even before he came into the room that the steps were those of Mr. Harrow. Flinching, and her eyes very bright, she stood quite still, easing the fingers of her gloves, and thus confronted his impetuous entry. The two of them faced each other.

"Oh," said Mr. Harrow, in a tone of relief. "I thought you'd dodged me."

"I thought so, too," thought Vera. But she did not say the words aloud.

IV

Mr. Harrow stood in the doorway of the typists' room, his head almost touching the frame of the door, so tall he was. He had exchanged the frock coat which he always wore during the day for an ordinary lounge coat, and this accentuated the length of his legs. But it made his shoulders seem broader. He looked down upon Vera who felt that as he did this she grew smaller and smaller.

"Look here," stammered Mr. Harrow. "I know you'll think I'm a brute and a bully, but I'm . . . I'm worried about you, and I got cut off last night. I wanted to say . . . er . . ." He began to grow red again. "I wanted . . . I want to help you, Miss Treacher, if I can."

"But you can't, Mr. Harrow," said Vera, in a voice which trembled as much from exasperation as from pain. "I told you last night you couldn't."

"Well, you're not giving me a chance," he answered.

"I don't want any help."

"We all want help," he persisted, stubbornly. "And

you want help. And I'm here. I'm not showy—that I'll admit. But the great thing about me is that I *want* to help you."

Vera stared at him. Her chin went up.

"Nothing you could do would help me," she said, in a deliberate tone.

"I don't agree." Mr. Harrow was as red as fire. "In fact, I'm sure you're wrong." Suddenly he shot out at her: "You think I'm common, don't you!" Vera could not answer. "Well, I *am*. You think I'm a machine for writing letters . . ."

"I don't want to talk about that," cried Vera. Then, passionately: "I wish you'd leave me alone!" There was a note of desperation in her voice, and something more. Mr. Harrow looked worried. "Can't you see you're pestering me? What good is that? It hurts me. I . . ." Vera checked her frantic speech. Her lips were unsteady; and from her eyes tears began to tumble one by one. Mr. Harrow made an effort to reply, but he could say nothing. Sounds came from his mouth, but they were unintelligible.

"I'm in love with you," he said, in his harsh, common voice. "That's what's the matter." His large, bony hands were raised slightly; and then they fell back to his sides. "You see, that's what's the matter. That's why I've seen you aren't well—and that sort of thing. I didn't want to tell you now; I wanted it to come later. . . . But you see, that's how it is with me." He stood frowning at Vera, red and awkward; and his jaw was forward, so that his whole aspect was one of determination.

"And I'm not in love with you," answered Vera, once more as pale as milk. "And I never shall be as long as I live. And I want to go home."

She made as if to push past Mr. Harrow, who instantly withdrew before her. As Vera walked quickly through

the big, deserted office, with the noise her heels made upon the bare floor echoing sharply, Mr. Harrow followed her. At the door leading from the office to the staircase Vera was checked, and he came to her aid.

"I'm very sorry," she said, impulsively. "Awfully sorry."

Mr. Harrow did not answer. His chin was aggressive, and the colour had left his cheeks. At the bottom of the stairs, as they passed the doorkeeper, he was still silent; but as they walked together along the street, which was now much quieter than it had been upon their previous walk, he remarked, as if to the air—

"You know, you're a bit too sure of that."

He stared straight before him. Quailing, Vera hastened her step. Mr. Harrow's determination alarmed her.

"I'm quite sure," she said.

"Think it over. I won't say anything about it for—for a long time." He was striding along by her side. "Perhaps you'll change."

"Never." Vera was firm.

"Your being so definite sort of makes me hopeful," answered Mr. Harrow.

Vera's heart stood still.

"Oh, no, no!" she exclaimed. "You really mustn't!"

What he felt she could not tell. When they reached the stopping place of the omnibuses Mr. Harrow merely raised his hat and left her. He did not say any more. Vera, alone, bit her lip. She did not cry to-night; she was too angry and perplexed to do so. For the moment her passionate sorrow was obscured by a more immediate trouble. Ghostlike, she stared straight before, not at all recognising the familiar landmarks which they were each moment passing upon the homeward journey.

Mr. Harrow! It was ridiculous! It was horrible!

CHAPTER XVI: ANNE'S RETURN

I

WHEN she reached home, as if everything, once gone wrong, grew worse and worse, until endurance could bear no more, Vera found Mum in a maddening state of excitement. Mum was one of those placid people whose excitement, when it arose, was out of harmony with her nature and out of proportion to the event. There were the germs of hysteria in Mum. She was like a cat upon a windy night. It seemed as though sometimes the dignity which ordinarily she had at command—the dignity of a domestic puss—was snatched from her. She became restless and unstable. In such moments Vera, herself so easily excited, found Mum feverishly exasperating. The two were instinctively hostile. It was the case this evening.

Mum came out at the kitchen door as Vera began to go up the narrow, creaking stairs. They could hardly see each other in the darkness of the little brown passage, but they did not need to see each other. Mum was silhouetted against light from the kitchen window. She looked like a small, plump shadow, and not like a real person at all.

"That you, Vera?" demanded Mum, unnecessarily.

At once Vera recognised her mood, and was the further jangled by it. A wave of similar excitement swept through her own nerves. She paused upon the stair, her feet leaden. She was divided between her own weary anguish and dread of this new assault.

"Yes, Mum," she listlessly answered, though her listlessness was repressively emphasised.

There came a sort of retaliatory whirring of excitement from Mum. Vera was aware of it, and of its effects upon them both, before Mum spoke again. She knew that Mum's eyes were glistening, that her cheeks were red, and her mouth was open, like the beak of an angry cock-robin. But Mum was not angry. She was only excited.

"There's a card from Anne," cried Mum, in a loud voice. She had evidently been thinking all day about the card. "They're coming back to-day." She paused, as if to give significance to the news. More quietly, she added: "Anne's going to try and run in this evening."

"This evening?" Vera's heart pounded. It was unbearable. In that little cabin of a house Mum must hear it, thump, thump, thump . . . She almost groaned. Then, faintly, so faintly that she could hardly be sure that she had spoken aloud: "Is Mortimer coming?"

"No." Mum snapped out the word. Her impatience might have been due to annoyance at the stupidity of such a question or to annoyance at Mortimer's inexplicable absence. Was there something else? Vera did not know. But Mum's answer was definitely a sign of nervous irritation. This was clear to Vera, who nevertheless breathed deeply with relief.

"I'll be down in a minute," she said, and heavily resumed her journey. There was no longer any elasticity in her step. She was tired and hopeless.

Mum continued to stand, like a little shadow, at the kitchen door, looking up, until Vera could no longer see her. There was something peculiar in such scrutiny. It made Vera's entry to the bedroom an escape. What did Mum know? What did she see? Why was she thus excited? Vera's heart was like water. She had nowhere to turn for comfort. Was ever anybody, she falteringly asked herself, so beset?

II

Downstairs, Vera saw the postcard which had come from Anne. It was the third they had received from her, and upon one side there was the photograph of a down, with sheep upon it. The photograph had been taken in brilliant sunshine, and all the shadows were black and squat. The message itself was quite brief—merely a statement that they were returning, and that Anne would come along in the course of the evening. It said: "Coming back to-morrow. I'll try and look in . . ." Surely they were *both* returning? The card was not at all enigmatic. What, then, had excited Mum?

Vera put the postcard aside with an absent air. She was thinking: "He'll be in London. In Kilburn. In the evenings . . . I can't bear it. I can't escape. I can't escape. I'm trapped." But she said nothing aloud, and strove to appear calm before Mum. All the time, she was watching Mum, and she felt that Mum was watching her. Mum's eyes held a curious brightness, and her cheeks were bright, as Vera had foreseen.

Vera could bear such silence no longer.

"Was this all that came?" she suddenly asked.

"Yes, that's all," answered Mum, looking up sharply, like a little bird. "Why?"

"I thought you seemed excited," said Vera, with a roughness that did not seek to mask the irritability which Mum's excitement aroused in her. She felt hysterical.

"I didn't expect them back so soon," replied Mum, in an odd voice.

The tone struck Vera. She raised her head.

"So soon?" she demanded. "Why, Mum . . . What d'you mean?"

But Mum was not in a mood to explain. She made no answer to Vera's question, but went out of the room.

Vera, guessing at some significance which she could not grasp, read the postcard a second time. What then? Was Mum excited at its bareness? At the early return? What did she see in that? Or at the omission of any reference to Mortimer . . . "I'll try and look in" . . . What significance could anybody . . . ?

Did she see . . . ? Vera's heart stopped beating for an instant. The blood rushed to her cheeks. Did Mum see . . . ?

A few moments later, Mum came back into the room. Vera was still blindly reading Anne's postcard, until the words hummed in her head. She was beginning to be affected by Mum's dread.

"It's *absurd,* Mum," groaned Vera, throwing the card upon the table.

"She hasn't written a letter all the time," said Mum.

"Well, people *don't.* Oh, Mum, you're being perfectly silly!"

Impatiently, Vera moved away from the table, her heart sinking.

"I wonder if I'm as silly as you think, Vera," said Mum, picking up the postcard and putting it away. "Perhaps I see things you don't think I see."

"Things that aren't there!" exclaimed Vera. "That's the most likely thing."

"Now, Vera! I didn't much like her *second* card. The first one was just about getting there. But the second I didn't much like. It wasn't what I call cheerful . . . Now I don't like this one at all," said Mum, rubbing her hands upon her apron, and sitting down at the table. "Come along, child; sit down and eat your supper. We'll see Anne herself, presently. That'll be better than all."

Mum had hardly spoken, and Vera was still drawing her chair out from the table, preparatory to sitting down, when a sound caused them both to turn towards the door.

The sound resembled that which a key would make in the lock of the front door. But it was not immediately followed by the opening of the door.

"False alarm," said Vera, with a tremendous effort at lightness.

Mum still listened. She even rose in her place, as if she planned to go out and investigate. Then she did in fact leave the table and walk to the kitchen door. For this time, there could be no mistake, somebody was opening the front door of the house with a key.

It was Anne.

III

Directly Anne was in the room Vera turned in triumph to Mum. For Anne looked radiant. She was as clear-eyed and graceful as ever.

"Where's Mortimer?" demanded Mum.

Anne smiled.

"He's arranging his books. He's got about a thousand books, and they all have to be arranged. I knew you'd be disappointed, Mum; but I hadn't the heart——"

"Books!" said Mum. "Well!"

"Oh, don't be angry with him, Mum!" Vera saw the flush in Anne's cheeks.

"Angry? No, dear. Only we never seem to see him now. I always thought Mortimer liked us all."

"He does! He does! He's always talking about you!" cried Anne, earnestly. "But just this evening——"

"Perhaps he likes us best at a distance?" asked Mum, in her little mild voice.

Anne drew a chair up to the table. She contemplated the meal with satisfaction.

"Supper!" said she, in a disarming voice. "I'd like some."

She was immediately served. Vera, watching her with hungry eyes of jealousy, could detect no change at all in Anne. She was calm, smiling, no less confident than she had always been at home. Such a pang of envy shot through Vera that she could not speak at all. She knew that Anne had looked once at her; she expected that Anne had seen that she was ill and unhappy; she believed that Anne was purposely abstaining from any comment before Mum.

"How *is* Mortimer?" Vera asked, carefully.

"He's very well. I think the holiday's made him rather lazy."

"How is it you came back so soon?" demanded Mum. "I thought you were going to stay the full fortnight."

Anne hesitated an instant before answering the question.

"I wanted to get the house in order," she said. And again Vera saw her cheeks tinged with pink.

IV

"Talking about the house," continued Anne. "You must both come to supper soon. I want to be a real housewife, you know."

"Hm," said Mum, absently. "Won't it be a trouble to you?"

"A horrible trouble, Mum!" cried Anne, looking wonderingly along the table. "Why shouldn't it be? Don't be miserable! Mortimer's going to bring Jack Stephens —from the bank—one night. Jack Stephens seems to be the only one he cares for at the bank."

"Oh, he hasn't many friends, then," said Mum.

"Not many," answered Anne, calmly. "But I thought he might as well keep those he has."

"Indeed, yes," said Mum. "Friends are very useful, sometimes."

"Also rather pleasant," responded Anne.

Vera longed to be alone with Anne, and dreaded to be alone with her. She felt that if they could be quite alone, as they had been in earlier years, with nothing to separate them in spirit, she would be better. When she was with Anne she seemed to inhale deep draughts of fresh strength. Anne was as rain to the parched flower.

"Let's go, Mum," said Vera. "Go to see Anne, I mean."

"Yes, dear," replied Mum, looking from one to the other of them over her glasses. The redness was dying from her cheeks. "But Dad'll be awfully upset if you don't come here Saturday. Awfully upset, he'll be."

Anne nodded.

"I think we'll have to come then," she admitted. "And you must all come the following Saturday to see us."

"All right, we'll do that," agreed Mum, with the air of one who makes a bargain.

"And, Vera, you must come before then," urged Anne, making a direct appeal.

"Yes," Vera said dubiously. She was wondering what impulse had made her active a moment earlier in the acceptance of Anne's invitation. "Yes, of course," she repeated.

At this instant Mum hurried out into the scullery to fetch the sweet, and Anne took advantage of her absence to say in a very low tone—

"It's really rather strange, being married. I'm counting on your help, Vera."

Their eyes met, and Vera saw for the first time a light of unusual strain in Anne's face which gave her a shock.

"Anne, dear," she whispered.

"And besides," continued Anne, in the same low tone, "I don't like the look of you, and I want to hear what Mr. Harrow's been doing."

Mr. Harrow! Vera felt as though all the blood in her body had rushed to her cheeks. Her face burned, and her neck, as if it had been scorched. Her throat was throbbing; her heart noisily thumped and thumped in her breast.

"Yes," she said, in a constrained tone, "I must tell you about Mr. Harrow."

And at that point Mum came back into the kitchen with the sweet, and looked fretfully at Anne as she set down the dish.

"I miss you, Anne," she said, in a rather doleful little voice. "Vera's got no more appetite than a canary-bird. I wish you'd talk to her."

Anne smiled at Vera across the table.

"That's just what I'm going to do, Mum," she cried. And became suddenly grave.

CHAPTER XVII: THE VISIT

I

EVENING came at last. The day had dragged from letter to letter, from sound to sound, from one interminable minute to the next; and at length it had ended. Vera was upon her way home. She had left the office, and in particular Mr. Harrow, far behind her. But she was not glad. She was not concerned with the office or with Mr. Harrow—these were quite minor troubles at present. She thought of nothing that had happened since the morning. What was still to happen was the cause of all her apprehensiveness.

The weather was now very warm and sweet, but with the airless, baking warmth of midsummer. And as her omnibus went, heavy-wheeled and slow, through the hot thoroughfares, Vera was trying, by will, to retard its progress. With her teeth set she was saying, "Slow, slow, go slow. . . . Never, never come to the end of the journey!" Ah, if that could only be! Above her was the merciless grey sky of London; in her nostrils the quivering, tar-laden heat that rose from burning pavements. All about her was the staleness of the afternoon, which was not yet dispersed by any evening breezes. Noise—the grinding noise of innumerable motor engines and the dull whanging of the motor horns, the skirr of tyres upon the asphalted roadway, the grunting, trundling sounds of slower vehicles,—every noise of the road was in her ears. And in her heart was panic.

Vera was afraid. Her blood ran cold in her veins. She was faint and languid with fear. To-night she was

for the first time going to Anne's new home. She did not know why she was going, or how it had been arranged that she should go. Nothing was clear but the one simple fact that she was committed to an evening's torture. How she would be able to endure it, Vera no longer asked herself. She was quite overborne by fear and circumstance.

She was to meet Anne, it had been agreed, at the railway station, where the omnibuses stopped; she was to go home with Anne, was to meet Mortimer. If she could even now have run away, Vera would have done so. She could not run away. She could not bring herself to determine upon running away. Will had forsaken her. All that resolve could effect was an outward coldness; within, there was no coldness, save the terrible chill which lay upon her heart.

In vain did she strive to fix her attention upon the road, the crowds, the evening. All alike were meaningless to her. She could not think at all, or attend to anything that passed. Only, she stared straight ahead, lost in the incoherence of panic. As the journey advanced, her agitation increased; because the more impossible it was to escape the ordeal the more terrible did that ordeal appear.

"I can't bear it," she thought. "It can't happen. It can't . . ." Then: "It must. Anne would know at once—if I said I was ill . . . No. It wouldn't do. She'd know. Why did I ever promise? I'm mad. I'm a coward. I can't bear it . . ."

In vain did Vera rack her wits for means of escape. The bus approached the rendezvous. Every instant made it the more clearly impossible to escape. There was no escape; there was never an escape—except death. Bitter thoughts swept suddenly through her mind.

"I never meant to love him," she groaned to herself. "It wasn't . . ." Quickly she leapt onward: "As if I'd

planned something! Why should I be punished? It's so unjust. Punish, punish, punish. For what? It's all wrong . . . And Anne—Anne's happy. She's happy, and I'm . . . Oh, I *can't* bear it!"

She could already—far ahead along the sun-baked road—see Anne waiting at the meeting place. Anne, in her old frock, her old hat, her old gloves, waiting; with her head erect, quite simple, quite unself-conscious . . . Anne never worried. Cold . . . She must have left her office early in order to be in plenty of time. Anne was always punctual. Hatefully right, and truthful, and punctual . . . She was never weak—she never had the temptation to be weak.

Vera rose from her seat, and, with the apprehension that she would never reach the ground, stood for a moment bent, holding the end of the seat, and feeling the omnibus quaking beneath her feet. Fearfully, she began to descend the unsteady staircase. Her feet almost refused to move. And when she was upon the pavement, standing beside Anne, she was forced to keep quite still for a moment, so much was she trembling; so loud and fast was the beating of her heart. Impossible to disguise it. Slower eyes than Anne's must have observed her loss of composure. She was uncontrollably trembling even to the lips.

"Why, Vera, dear." Anne's face was so near, so anxious, so loving. Her hand was at Vera's elbow, to help her; and when at last they could move, very slowly, it was upon Anne's arm that Vera leaned.

"It's the heat," stammered Vera. "It must be the heat. I've . . . I've been feeling queer all day."

Oh! if Anne would only let her go home! There, indeed, she would be better! There she might hide. The passionate wish surged through Vera. For an instant brightened. Then her body relaxed its sudden tenseness.

Her head drooped. Too late! What she most longed for could not be. She was in a trap. They must go on.

II

What did Anne think? Was she inclined to link up this faintness with what lay before them? Quickly Vera searched Anne's face for an answer, to find that Anne, clearly puzzled, but with her intuition full of resource, was similarly trying to read what was hidden from her. Anne could see such a lot—everything but what was immediately under her notice. Stupid Anne! thought Vera, thankfully. It was strange enough that they should both be unreadable; strange enough, and common enough, no doubt, for two human beings to be mutually mystifying. Anne had no look of suspicion; her expression was candid, as if she felt nothing but pity. Vera's trembling grew less. She leant upon the arm that was her present aid, and drew courage from that arm's sweet firmness. Gradually, as it had done before, Anne's strength brought her incalculable relief.

"I'm better now," she breathed. "I can't think how I came to be so silly. When I began to get off the bus I suddenly felt I should never do it."

"But, Vera!" exclaimed Anne, shocked. She started, plucking tight the wasted arm that was linked within her own. "Have you been like this for some time? I'm frightened about you."

"Oh, . . . it isn't anything. Only lately . . ." Vera was evasive.

"Ever since you fainted that time? Didn't your holiday do you any good?"

They were turning now from the main road into a street of smallish red-brick houses. The houses had large windows of such cheap glass that they caught all sorts of

reflections from the light, and gave the appearance of squinting at the world.

"Is this where you live?" asked Vera, feebly. "Your road?"

"You know very well, Vera," bantered Anne, although her glance was urgent. "Don't use a red-herring. I asked you—didn't your holiday do you any good?"

"I . . ." Vera was almost distraught. She looked wildly about her. "I don't know. I don't remember," she stammered. "No, it didn't do me any good. I was lonely, and ill. . . . It was horrid."

"I feel self-reproachful," said Anne. "I ought to have gone with you. I ought."

"You? Oh, no!" said Vera faintly, with a shiver. She could hardly walk, so weak were her knees. Each step brought them closer and closer to the house, to Mortimer . . . "You couldn't . . ."

"Yes. I ought to have. At any rate, something should have been done. Either Mum or I should have gone. I can't think what we were thinking about. You oughtn't to have gone alone. I've been perfectly beastly. I won't be it any more. I've got to look after you. I'm going to. Oh, *dear* me!" There was a sharp impatience in Anne's voice. "It's so *horrible* to have no money, and to have no liberty. People don't realise what it means . . ."

"Anne, I . . ." Vera clung to Anne's arm more tightly than ever. Her face felt as though it was frozen. It was impossible for her to go any farther. She must rest, and then go home, whatever Anne might learn. She could bear no more. "I really . . ."

"Here we are!" cried Anne, turning in at an iron gateway.

It was again too late. There was no turning back now. With a groan, Vera followed.

III

The house was rather taller than some of those which they had passed at the beginning of the road. It was one of several that had a half-basement, with three floors above. The lodgings which Anne and Mortimer had in this house were upon the top-floor, and they were not self-contained. To reach them, it was necessary to pass through the silent, demurely guarded dwelling of another household composed of a respectable stockbroker's clerk and his wife.

Anne led the way up a flight of stone steps to the front door, opened the door, and turned to go up some steep, creaking stairs which began at one side of a large, high-ceilinged hall. Hall and staircase were covered with shining brown oilcloth. Everything shone with a kind of sleekness, for the landlady, having no children, was house-proud. The woodwork was all painted a light brown and varnished, so that it glistened wherever the sunlight caught it; and the sunlight was made prismatic by its passage through a coloured window. It made every surface a distorting mirror, and the effect of such calm, shining quietness was as menacing as a frown from sedate, elderly persons. Vera was hushed with the alarmingness of entering a strange house with so respectable a personality. She crept upon tiptoe, her heart beating in crowded thuds. She held fast to the stair-rail, looking always upwards at Anne, and shivering at every creak of the stairs and every faint whine of the balustrade under her hand, until they reached the comparative darkness of the top floor. Here Anne paused, a little out of breath.

"Are you there, Mortimer?" she called, softly. There was a muffled cry. "Here we are," said Anne, and went straight into the back room, a bedroom. Here two small beds stood side by side; and Vera could see beyond them

a window. She was so ill at ease, so disturbed and feverish, that she could not look about her, but kept her head down and her eyes timidly half-closed. Her impressions were blurred, her sensations so rapid and conflicting as to leave her at a loss.

The ceiling of the room was not as high as that of the hall, but it was as spotless. The room itself was rather large, with faded pictures and photographs upon the walls and a small ugly brown mantelpiece over an inadequate fireplace. A rag rug lay before the fireplace, all browns and blacks and purples, and the floor was covered with a flower-patterned linoleum. There were lace curtains at the windows, and all the painted woodwork was the same ugly sandy brown colour as the mantelpiece. Nothing in the room was pretty or attractive. Confusedly, Vera went to the window, and looked out of it upon grey slates and red chimneypots and drab bricks—a doleful prospect. The chill upon her heart deepened. And as she moved across the room she heard the door of the next room opened—she caught the crackling sound of varnish that would never dry, and with mingled fear and expectancy strained her ears for a further sound, for any indication that Mortimer was about to join them. Instinctively, she shrank, that her hunger might not be seen.

"Not much of an outlook," said Anne, apologetically, following her to the window and looking out of it from Vera's side. "It can't be helped. You'd better wash here. There's everything on the washstand, and brushes here. You don't mind cold, do you?"

Vera looked back into the room, at Anne. Anne, it seemed, was also a little flurried, for she was speaking in a constrained way, as she might have done to a guest of whose complaisance she was not quite sure. The sense that Anne was unwontedly self-conscious had a singular effect upon Vera. It excited her a little, but it so diverted

her thoughts from awareness of their own agitation that she recovered a little strength. Without replying, she poured some cold water from the squat, cream-coloured ewer into the unwieldy cream-coloured basin. The shock of the water upon her face and hands was a relief. It braced her. She laved her face almost caressingly, glad of the relief and the shelter which it afforded.

At the same moment Anne turned swiftly to the door.

"I'll be back in a moment," she said. "Towel here . . ." She pointed. She was gone.

"Anne!" Vera's feeble whisper—prelude to a plea that she should not be left alone—was unheard. The door was closed. Vera, still bathing her face, could hear voices in the next room—a murmur. Then nothing. She pictured the kiss between the two of them, and fierce warmth flooded her cheeks and made her eyes smart. Slowly, she coiled her hair afresh, with fingers which trembled so much that she was still engaged in her task when Anne returned.

"Ready?" asked Anne, with a kind of constrained briskness. Then the constraint disappeared. "Is your head aching?" she went on. "I've got a little bottle of eau de cologne. Half a minute." She went to a drawer, and produced a small, wicker-covered phial.

A few moments later they were both at the door, and an instant afterwards Vera found herself shrinkingly in the other room. Mortimer, she saw in a mist, vaguely, and with terror and exultation at her heart, was rising to greet her.

IV

It was a moment before Vera could grasp anything. She was in a room larger than the one she had just left, and lighter. She was between Anne and Mortimer.

There was a large table to the right, in the middle of the room, and she felt a strip of carpet beneath her feet. Her first conscious impression was of Mortimer's pallor. He did not look at her; or at least he was not looking at her when she dared to raise her own eyes. Instead, he looked down, touched her hand—no more—with hurried fingers, retired again to his chair. He was not interested in her! And she, seeing his indifference, was aware of stabbing pain, of her heart rising in her breast and suffocating her, became silent and confused, and sank into the chair corresponding to his own, at the opposite end of the hearthrug.

From this position she could see Mortimer, and, over his head, the tall bookshelves upon which were ranged his literary possessions. They made a bright and glowing decoration for the room, which otherwise, in spite of its cleanliness, was uninteresting. It had a plain grey wall-paper of the cheapest kind, and upon the walls were large and distracting pictures. Within Vera's immediate range of vision was a lithograph representing a violent storm at sea, and when she turned to look behind her she found another lithograph representing what apparently was the same piece of water, without storm.

And then, growing bolder, and her terror subsiding, Vera allowed her eyes to fall upon Mortimer. She dwelt attentively, ready upon the slightest movement to look away, upon his half-averted face, scrutinising it for love's sake, and because she was starving for sight of him. He was very pale, as if he were ill; and his lips were closely set. His grey and smouldering eyes were dark, darker than she had ever seen them; and his whole face thin. But Mortimer, as if restlessly, moved from his chair away from the hearthrug. Vera could no longer see him. He began to busy himself in helping Anne at the table, which was already laid for supper; and when Vera

rose also, with the wish to be of use, he chillingly bade her sit down.

"Do let me," pleaded Vera.

She stood watching him, her head back and her hand thrown forward in appeal. But Mortimer would not respond, and looked away with a kind of coldness which wounded her afresh.

"Certainly not," said Mortimer, with an assumption of firmness.

"I really can," said Vera, in a low voice. She still looked at him, making no attempt to sit down, but feeling her heart stir within her breast.

"No, Vera," cried Anne, very gently. "Let him do it. Mortimer, she's not well——"

"Ill?" demanded Mortimer, with sudden quickness.

"Nonsense," Vera protested. "It's nothing."

Anne led her back to the chair from which she had risen, and made her sit down.

"Ah, yes," said Mortimer, with abstracted busyness. "How's old Harrow?" He asked the question with a jaunty air, as if he were pleased to have something to ask her. He was as shy as she, then!

"He's quite well, and very busy; and more awful than ever!" answered Vera, hardly knowing what glib words were going from her lips.

"Oh, Vera! I thought you liked him!" cried Anne, reproachfully.

"Well, I *don't!*" It was vehement. A surge of temper ran through Vera. She flamed into protest. "I hate him."

"Vera!" The exclamation was Anne's.

Vera, having made her declaration, was stricken with fresh trembling. With a shiver, having jumped forward in her chair, she sat back again, blankly staring.

"What's he been doing?" asked Mortimer, coolly. He fixed his eyes upon her as if she were something unpleasant.

Vera could not answer. Speech was out of the question. She could only shake her head.

Anne was at her side in an instant.

"Don't talk about him," she said swiftly, in a low tone. "Talk about something else. How's Mum; and how's Dad? Mortimer, finish cutting the bread, will you?"

Mortimer was gone again. Vera was free of the dismay which she had been caused by his intent gaze.

"Oh, they're all right," she at last feebly responded.

"Has Dad made that new man—Hoppins, or whatever his name is—insure his little boy's education? I meant to ask Mum, but I forgot it."

"I don't know," said Vera, in a dull voice. "I haven't asked him."

"Dad's really terrible. He seems to make the most awfully personal inquiries. I think he'll get into trouble one day. Somebody will knock him down, or something."

"They won't!" contradicted Vera. "They'll all do as they're told." She was contemptuous of Dad's fellow-workers. "And then Dad will get another commission."

Anne returned to the table, and finished its arrangement.

"Come along," she said. "You there, Vera, and Mortimer here. And I ought to explain that the reason you've got the shaky knife is that it cuts better than the others. It won't come out of the handle, we find. Mortimer's got one that seems to have been gnawed by a dog. Is it 'gnawed,' Mortimer, or 'gnawn'?"

"And what have you got?" asked Vera, coming forward.

She could see what Anne had got. It was a knife

which had once been like other table-knives, but which no longer resembled them. It had a blade of not more than two-and-a-half inches.

"Oh, mine's been amputated," explained Anne.

As Vera put out her hand to withdraw the chair which stood before her place at the table Mortimer put out his hand to move the chair for her. Their two hands met. Vera, at this unexpected contact, snatched her hand away, realised her folly, grew hot, and sat down in confusion. Mortimer took his seat with no change in his impassive expression, but he kept his eyes lowered, and his lips were pressed very tightly together. He looked grim and obstinate.

So the meal began.

V

In what followed, it was Anne who spoke most often. Both Vera and Mortimer were silent. He listened gravely enough, and threw in a few words; but Vera could not say anything at all. Her feelings were too mixed. She was content to sit there with Mortimer such a short distance away, and with Anne ready to help them both. And as she sat, Vera looked from one to the other, her mind all the time noticing the little things they said and did, the little variations of their tones when they spoke to one another, the glances they exchanged. . . . She could see nothing at all. When the sum of all her impressions could be totalled, she was no nearer an understanding than before. Mortimer—try she never so hard to invent a difference—was unchanged; Anne was unchanged. They appeared to be upon excellent terms, happy, easy . . .

Anne described their holiday. She gave a picture of the life at Shallowford and spoke of the walks they had

taken, the afternoons they had spent idling in the shadow while sunshine burned the countryside and made the very evenings warm. She told them both of the present state of affairs at the office, of Mr. Sims's abruptness to herself and others, of Mr. Twist's remarks to herself about Mr. Sims, and anything else that came into her head. And all the time Anne was talking Vera was looking from Anne to Mortimer, and storing memories over which in the dreary days that lay ahead of her she could incessantly pore.

"Mr. Twist came in this afternoon, for example," said Anne, "and Mr. Sims wasn't there. I don't know what has happened to Mr. Sims in these days. He's so snappy with everybody, and rude to them, and he goes out a great deal, and comes back as glum as a waxwork show . . . So Mr. Twist . . ."

"What's he like?" demanded Mortimer.

Vera started. Was he immediately jealous? His tone suggested it. And at once her spirits, which had risen, sank deep.

"Mr. Twist? I couldn't tell you!" declared Anne, with a blank expression. She laughed slightly at her own dilemma. Neither Vera nor Mortimer laughed. "He's like such a lot of men—and yet he's not like them at all, I expect. He's about forty-five. He's fair, with a curl at the front of his hair. It's a big forehead, bulging. And a little thin face, with a fair moustache. And a Cockney voice . . ." Anne's description came to a stop. "He said that some of the instructions Mr. Sims gave appalled him. I said, why didn't he tell Mr. Sims? And he said a really awful thing. He said, 'Mr. Sims can't bear to be told the truth.' Don't you think that was an awful thing—to have said about you, I mean?"

"Depends what you call the truth," retorted Mortimer.

"I can't tell you what the truth is," said Anne,

spiritedly; "but I think I'd rather hear the truth than the other thing."

"You wouldn't," declared Mortimer.

"Would you, Mortimer?" suddenly flashed Vera. He did not look away from Anne's face. Ah, he could bear to look at Anne! Vera continued to watch his face.

"Of course not," answered Mortimer. "I should hate the truth."

"Mortimer!" This from Anne.

"It's true," he declared, to Anne's laughter. "And you don't like me to say it."

"Well," said Anne, very frankly, "I certainly shouldn't like you to say it, if it were true. But I'd rather have that truth than have you pretend anything to me."

"Pretend? Aren't we pretending all the time?"

"I hope not." Vera saw Anne colour as she spoke. "If you think of the meaning of what Mr. Twist said, you'll see how—in a way—it makes you despise Mr. Sims."

"Oh, I'm not so ready to despise people," objected Mortimer.

"You're very ready to be impatient with them, aren't you?" said Anne, still flushed. "And that's a sort of contempt. I don't think one ought to feel contempt, except for baseness. But if Mr. Sims can't bear to be told the truth in business, he can't bear to be told it in his—his life."

"Not necessarily," countered Mortimer.

"If I couldn't speak the truth to somebody I'd rather not have anything to do with them," said Anne, warmly.

"Oh, but you're being so fantastic!" said Mortimer.

"Am I?" asked Anne, in a tone of wonderment. "Mortimer, do you really mean that it's odd to prefer the truth?"

"It's unusual," responded Mortimer.

"How strange I am!" cried Anne. "And never knew it."

"She *does* like the truth, Mortimer," whispered Vera.

At last Mortimer looked at her. She met his eyes fairly, and they were cold as steel. All the glow that she had in past times seen there was absent now.

"I wonder if she does," was all Mortimer answered. He smiled slightly at Anne, and Vera was aware of another bitter certainty that he loved Anne. Her heart turned to water.

VI

The evening passed. And at ten o'clock Anne said that she was going to take Vera home.

"You can stay here," she told Mortimer. "I want to talk to Vera."

Mortimer nodded.

Vera, thankful that she was not to have his company, but at the same time conscious of the fact that under her dread there had been longing, rose in obedience to Anne's summons. In three minutes she was back again with Anne in the sitting-room.

"Good-bye, Mortimer."

"Good-bye."

To her surprise he came forward and took her hand. Then, as abruptly, he dropped it, held the door for them, closed it when they were down the first few stairs, and was lost to Vera's sight. With the closing of the door it seemed that light had gone. Vera followed Anne very quietly; but she was for a moment so blinded by tears which she must not shed that she twice almost stumbled in the descent.

They were in the dark street now, and Anne held her

arm. Vera could not resist the impulse to look up at the windows of the house they were leaving. She could see a light in those upon the top floor. But her hope of a last glimpse of Mortimer was dashed. He was not there. No shadow darkened the window. Without power to see her way, she followed Anne's guidance, feeling that unless she walked quickly and talked and made some vehement effort to control herself by these means she must burst into unrestrainable sobbing. For indeed, whatever hope may have formed secretly and by the devious workings of desire within her bosom, that hope seemed now to be dead.

CHAPTER XVIII: TEMPTATION

I

VERA spent that night wakefully. At times she wept in spite of all her resolve not to weep. At times she lay with her burning eyes wide open. But sleep did not come. Desperation came—the desperation that leads to violent tossing and turning, to the loss of all sensation except that of burning staleness. In the morning she had a bitter headache, could eat nothing for breakfast, could not bear to encounter Mum's suppressed concern.

"You'd better call in at the doctor's on the way home this evening," Mum said, as Vera was leaving the house. "You don't look fit to go out."

Instead of answering, Vera, because she could not speak, closed the front door hurriedly. It sounded as though she had slammed it. She walked quickly away, in a fever to escape from the atmosphere of care and anxiety which Mum seemed nowadays to carry always with her. All Vera's nerves were jangling; she felt ill and fierce after her exhaustingly restless night. Everything irritated her anew, from Mum's warning advice to the heel of her shoe, which turned as she walked too carelessly over a rough part of the road, and from the pain that followed to the omnibus which she just missed. She knew that she would be late at the office. She knew that all was bound to go wrong for the whole day. Her nerves seemed to be tearing. She was desperate.

II

During the journey to town, every lurking thought leapt out afresh, until her head ached more savagely than ever. She could feel violent throbbing in her head. Her lips were dry and swollen. Her eyes were burning, and the lids of them were so heavy that she could hardly keep her eyes open. Over and over again Vera exclaimed with exasperation at her own state, and the effect of each cry of impatience was to increase her discomposure. She knew that she could not continue to live in this exhausting fever. She knew that she would be very ill unless she could find some way out of the difficulty. She began casting about for the way.

Throb, throb, throb, throb—endlessly that terrible pain behind her eyes went on, and her eyes closed and opened as if she were falling asleep. Yet Vera was not falling asleep. She was dreadfully awake, and her mind alert. She was seeking for some path of escape. To go right away was impossible. To continue to live as she was doing was impossible. Each day her power of resistance was diminishing. She was weaker, more ready to succumb. There was another possibility—another temptation. Stealthily it insinuated itself, clung to her thoughts, grew stronger, grew powerful, grew well-nigh irresistible; it was dismissed, and it came throbbing back into her brain with hideous persistency, until Vera jerked her head and fought with fear and disgust against temptation. And always that solution came creeping back, that anodyne, that way of escape.

"No!" shouted Vera; and her cry was lost in the noise of the traffic.

She was at her journey's end; she was walking to the office; she was passing the doorkeeper, going up the stairs, crossing the big office where clerks sat at long desks and

turned to stare after her as she entered the typists' room. And all the time Vera knew what the solution of her problem was, and knew that in spite of her shouted "no" she had secretly resolved upon this refuge.

"Something *must* be done!" she said defiantly to herself. "I can't go on as I'm doing. I shall go mad." And yet, struggling with her knowledge and her denial, was a feeling of great shame and self-condemnation. She was resolved. Her strength was gone. Her weakness was dominant. The thought, dismissed again and again, returned; it poisoned all her other thoughts, and fastened upon her sick brain with determination such as none of those other thoughts had the resolution to show. But as this thought encroached Vera quailed before it. Resolved, she yet quailed before it. Feebly, knowing that she was resolved, she yet protested to herself, trying in this way to placate her bitterly shamed sense of virtue.

"It wouldn't be fair," she said, in secret. "Why not?" demanded temptation. "You could do it. Others have done it. Why not you?" "It's horrid." "I must do something." "I *couldn't.*" And then a sort of blustering. "It's not my fault. I *must* escape. Escape, escape . . ." The blessed word "escape" was like balm to her. Again she dismissed temptation. Again temptation returned. "He's a man. He can look after himself. It's not I, but he, who decides. And I must . . ."

Vera was thinking of Mr. Harrow.

III

Mr. Harrow came into the room in the middle of this hidden conflict. And as she had her first glimpse of him Vera shudderingly recoiled from the point to which temptation had carried her. Everything that was fastidious in her nature revolted from the plan which temptation had

been forming in her mind. Mr. Harrow's long, cadaverous body; his thin, creased face and slightly protruding eyes; his ugly fair hair, which retained a curl in its dying wave; his large knuckles, and the clumsy, respectful carriage of an amateur private soldier—all these aspects of him were presented to Vera in a single flash. The common, muscular grain of Mr. Harrow, tough and stringy, was unattractive to her. It disgusted her. He was like rope, dry and tough and common. When he spoke his voice was as rasping and monotonous as ever, and the vibration of it roused a nervous echo within herself which was intolerable. It was like the note of a piano which sets ornaments jingling in discord. "No!" said Vera's heart, with savage hostility. "Never!"

She looked with dislike at Mr. Harrow. His approach to herself was slow and formidable. In his hand was a large sheaf of letters. And as he came into the room Miss Smart peered shrewdly up at Vera, and then, with an eye cocked elsewhere, down her nose at Miss Westgate. Vera knew that not much escaped Miss Smart. Anger surged within her—anger at her own weakness, and at Mr. Harrow's stupid inability to conceal his feelings. Always his kindness was for Vera; always he deferred to her, glanced first at her—straight from the doorway, at his entry, as if she magnetised him; and showed plainly in his face that for him she was the only woman in the room—in the world.

Vera suddenly felt her cheeks grow hot. Her lips trembled. She disliked Mr. Harrow. She hated him. She had made up her mind to wrong him.

IV

"Dear Madam. We are in receipt of your favour of the twentieth instant, and are immediately getting in touch

with the manufacturers of the stove which you purchased from us . . ." said Mr. Harrow, in a single breath. "We may mention that although we have sold some hundreds of these stoves yours is the first complaint of its kind to reach us."

Mr. Harrow was looking down at Vera as she made her swift shorthand notes of the letter. He was so unmistakably bringing scrutiny to bear upon the dark hollows under her eyes, and upon the sharpness of her cheek bone, that Vera moved uneasily. She strove not to give any sign of discomposure, but she could bear his examination no longer. She repressed a faint shudder. Mr. Harrow made no comment; perhaps, even, he had the wit to notice that Miss Smart, being idle, was all eyes, although she pretended to be sharpening her pencils and dusting her machine. Vera gradually recovered her self-control. Hysterically, she forced frigidity upon herself. She waited, pencil raised.

"Dear Sir," said Mr. Harrow. "In reply to your esteemed inquiry, the cost of making the large canopy would be . . ." He sought among his papers. "Damn it, I've forgotten my memo. Just a tick, Miss Treacher . . ." He hurried out of the room—a long figure with sweeping coat-tails. The breeze he stirred fluttered some papers to the floor, and Vera stooped to pick them up. As she sat erect once more she saw Miss Smart dart across the room and whisper to Miss Westgate; and then Mr. Harrow came sweeping back through the doorway.

"Oh, Miss Smart," he said, going over to where Miss Smart, caught between her own desk and Miss Westgate's, was trying to look as though her visit had been made on business, "I wish you'd look up our letters to Livingstone's. We've written to them several times about

those special bronze rings for Mrs. Pellow. I want to see all the correspondence—their letters and ours."

Miss Smart, with her nose in the air, went dawdlingly away to a cupboard at the other end of the room, found that letter books which should have been there were missing, and was compelled, in search of them, to go forth upon a journey through the office. Mr. Harrow watched her go. Then he turned back to Vera, and she saw upon his long face a look of peculiar drollery.

"That woman's staring," Mr. Harrow murmured, under his breath, like a ventriloquist.

"Is she?" said Vera, and checked herself.

"She's always staring. Her eyes'll fall out one day." He resumed his position, standing upright, with his letters in one hand and his right foot upon the rail of a chair. "In fact I can't stand her. She pries. I say, you look ill. Are you?"

"Yes," said Vera, her eyes down and her heart beating. She despised herself.

"You'll never be better as long as you don't try," said Mr. Harrow.

"I do try."

"You don't seem to. You know, you want rousing." Vera shivered. "You do, really. You want some change and excitement."

"Excitement!" It was drawn from her.

"Yes. Excitement. A few theatres, and a dance or two—with some decent chap who'll look after you." Vera shook her head. "I know what I'm talking about," said Mr. Harrow. "You want somebody to look after you."

Vera was stifling. With a great effort she forced herself to overcome the repugnance which was causing her to tremble again.

"Perhaps I do," she agreed, in a low voice.

"You want *me* to look after you," he persisted. "A plain, common man like me. Not too brainy, but full of sense. See what I mean?"

"I see," answered Vera, drearily.

"I know I said I wouldn't say anything just yet. I admit I said it. Quite true. But look at you as you are now . . ." The rasping voice was huskier. It was full of feeling. "Damn it," said Mr. Harrow. "I'm not made of stone. I can't bear to see you getting whiter every day like this. It gives me the pip. I want to get you out of all this and run you into the country on the old mo-bike . . ." He broke off. "Let's get on," he resumed, immediately. "See, what did I say to old stick-in-the-mud?"

Faintly, Vera read aloud the few words he had dictated to the customer who required a large canopy. ". . . the cost . . . would be . . ."

"Well, what about it?" whispered Mr. Harrow. "They're busy again now. They both left off just then. What about it?"

With her head still down, and her face red and puckered with grief, Vera, yielding to temptation, abruptly threw in her hand.

"Let's have tea together," she stammered, breathing rapidly. "To-night . . . I'll . . . I'll tell you then."

And with that, disregarding Miss Ellis and Miss Westgate, because she was no longer able to bear herself with dignity, Vera covered her face with her two hands, pressing them close to hide her shame. Her temples throbbed. Tears forced their way between her fingers. She was abased, miserable, full of horror at her own action; but she had yielded to temptation. The battle had been lost. Mr. Harrow flushed a deep brick red, and looked quickly away from her. She felt his hand lightly upon her shoulder for an instant. Then it was gone. He cleared his

throat. A moment later, having dabbed a handkerchief to her eyes, Vera once more held her pencil and her notebook in position.

"Seventeen pounds, ten shillings," continued Mr. Harrow, taking up the letter at the point at which it had been interrupted; "but of course any special instructions you might have as to the details . . ." He cleared his throat. For a moment his voice had been quite thick and confused.

CHAPTER XIX: BETRAYAL

I

THEY went to a large and empty restaurant for tea. Vera had made herself go, in spite of every inclination to hide. She had left the office early, and so had Mr. Harrow. He was waiting for her in his tweed suit and a soft felt hat. He was waiting very quietly, and he greeted her very kindly. Never once, in the course of their walk to the restaurant, did he touch her. But every side peep which Vera took at him made her heart sink. Mr. Harrow frightened her. More, he displeased her.

By leaving early, they had missed the first mass of homegoing pedestrians.

"I thought we'd go to this place—Trovato's—because it's some way from the office, and very few people come here to tea. I happen to know you can get tea here. I happen to know that, see? I make it my business, wherever I go, to find out where you can get tea. You can get it in most places in London, if you don't mind what it tastes like. Just across here, and down that street, and we're practically there. Ever been to Trovato's? The band won't be playing, I expect. Damn it, I believe it *will* be." Mr. Harrow paused, biting a nail. "I believe it *does* play . . ."

"Never mind," pleaded Vera, in a dull, cold voice. "Let it play."

"Yes, but I wanted us to have a talk. However, perhaps it'll be all right."

He continued to lead the way. They came out into a

wide street, and Trovato's was before them. It was a stupendous place, painted blood colour, and decorated at every point with gold. Gold knobs, gold spikes, gold bars, gold circles, all picked out the blood-coloured face of Trovato's. The porch appeared to be a solid mass of twisted and manipulated gold. And below the porch there was an entrance hall, carpeted and lined with palms in tubs. There were blood-coloured seats, and many mirrors, and more palms, more gold, a fountain. Everything within was of cream and gold, the walls cream with gold flutings, gold panellings, a gold frieze. The restaurant was lofty. A huge dome, heavily gilt, rose so high that one felt dizzy in looking up at it. Flowers and palms stood everywhere, brilliant among the cream and gold and against the endless blood-coloured velvet pile carpet. At this time of day there were few waiters, but Vera had never been into such a vulgar, imposing place before, and she was shrinking behind Mr. Harrow during the whole of their ceremonious entry to the restaurant.

"Not too near the band," Mr. Harrow said loudly to the bowing *maître d'hôtel.* "In fact, as far away as possible."

Vera was compelled to follow the waiter into the deserted space below the dome. She was crushed by the immensity of the place, by the fountain and the palms and the velvet seats and the mirrors. She saw hundreds of tables spread over a vast area of floor; and all the time was dazed and dazzled by the gold and the flood of light which shone down from the dome. It was a long way to their table, set in an alcove far from the raised bandstand; and when the table was reached Vera saw how the waiter, with practised gestures, whipped out the chairs for them, whipped out a little book from his tail pocket, and awaited the order which Mr. Harrow was to give.

They had strawberries and cream, with bread and butter and cakes and tea. And as Mr. Harrow ordered the meal, Vera looked at the solemn sadness of the black-browed, black-moustached waiter, and then back again to Mr. Harrow. The waiter was as obviously a foreigner as Mr. Harrow was obviously an Englishman. In no other country in the world could one find a native so tall and bony and cadaverous and fair and gritty as Mr. Harrow was. She watched him unseen, seeing the quick downward jerks of the waiter's head, hearing Mr. Harrow's rasping voice with its note of affable familiarity with the waiter, and knowing by instinct that Mr. Harrow was always affably familiar with waiters.

Presently the waiter went away, and Mr. Harrow leant his elbows upon the table and clasped his large hands, staring at her for an instant with his rather prominent grey eyes.

"Well, that's done," he said, in a tone of satisfaction. "Comfortable?"

"I'm rather frightened of this big place," said Vera, speaking very distinctly.

Mr. Harrow laughed.

"Oh!" he said. "Soon get over that. See, that's what I *mean*. This is a change for you. Don't want to get all stewed up in a place like Blankenburg's at your age. I suppose you don't go much to the theatre, do you? D'you like the music-hall? Musical shows? Oh, I like 'em all, myself. I'm like most other people, don't care much what a show is, unless it sends me to sleep. But mind you, I don't like the *problem* plays. I draw the line at them. See what I mean? I draw the line at them. In my opinion there's no reason for them. They're not about problems that trouble you and me. They don't help. They're faked problems. See what I mean? Shaw —yes. I'm very fond of Shaw. He's different. I like

him. And d'you know why? Because he laughs at the English. That's why everybody likes him."

"But *you're* English, aren't you, Mr. Harrow?" asked Vera. She was almost frantic with relief at his evident kind intention to talk of general things. She was grateful to him, but she was not so much grateful as thankful.

"English? I should just about think I was!" cried Mr. Harrow. "By the way, my name's Alfred." Vera shivered. "Did you know that? You don't like it. Nor do I. But I've got a second name you can use if you like. And that's Randall. Alfred Randall Harrow. D'you think you could say Randall?" His voice was sunk a little. There was a jocularity in it, but there was also the kindness which he might have shown to a child.

"I think so," murmured Vera, faintly.

"You know, I'd *very* much like to hear you say it," said Mr. Harrow, with a shy grin.

"Randall," whispered Vera—not caressingly, but in a voice that was chilled with shame, with despair.

"That's great," said Mr. Harrow. "Yes, I'm English, O.K.," he went on, as if to cover confusion of his own. "But for some reason the English like to be laughed at. They know what Shaw says about them is true; but they don't think he means it. See what I mean?"

"They don't like truth," said Vera, echoing what she had heard from Mortimer. "Nobody does."

"Bless you; they thrive on it."

"I don't," she volunteered, in a very low tone.

"Well, it all depends on the way it's put. See? There's a way of putting it. Suppose a man comes up to me and says I'm a damned ugly fellow, for instance. I don't mind that, because I know it's true and I'm not vain. But supposing another fellow begins sneering and hinting things about it, I should say to him: 'Well, what the—well, what's the matter with my face?' I should most

likely give him something that wouldn't improve *his* face. Now, that's clear, isn't it?"

"Quite clear," agreed Vera, still in her subdued, frightened voice.

"I wonder what's happened to that waiter." He turned his head, and looked, craning, over his shoulder. Through the vast, echoing room, Vera heard the sound made by the tapping of Mr. Harrow's knife upon his plate.

"Oh, Mr. Harrow!" she breathed, in protest. "Don't!"

"Can do that with a man waiter," he answered, reassuringly, with another grin. "Not with a waitress. She'd make *you* wait. They talk about equality of the sexes, but that's an instance to the contrary. This chap'll hustle along. Yes, here he comes. See him?"

"Yes."

"I say: I noticed you said 'Mr. Harrow.' D'you think you could remember?"

Vera could not bear to raise her eyes to meet those which were fixed upon her.

II

They ate their strawberries; and Mr. Harrow talked about the restaurant, and about theatres and actors and the English and the French and the Americans, about Blankenburg's and Miss Smart and Miss Westgate and Miss Ellis and Mr. Belper and the heads of the departments. And at last he began to talk about himself, quite easily, and without false shame.

"Now I've got a fair idea of what you think about me," he said; "and it's half true. But it's not all true. And I've got a fair idea of what I think about myself; and I don't expect *that's* all true, either. But I know a bit more about myself than you do. I know I'm no beauty.

I know I'm common. And my point is that I'm none the worse for that. I mean, when you get down to rock bottom. It means I'm the same all through. There's not much veneer work. You get some of these refined pretty boys, and there's nothing behind it except just dirt and shavings. They're as selfish as *cocottes,* out for what they can get. Now, I'm not. My idea is that other people have got as much right to exist as I have. That's civilised, isn't it?"

"Quite civilised," agreed Vera, in a frozen voice.

"And I improve on acquaintance. You like me better as you go on. Well, that's true of most people, I think; but it's a thing to remember about a person. I'm the son of a bootmaker, and my father made the mistake of trying to turn me into a gentleman. It was a mistake. My grandchildren may be gentlemen; but I'm not one."

"I think you *are* one," said Vera, painfully.

"Oh, you think that?" continued Mr. Harrow, evidently pleased. "Well, that's straight, isn't it! I'm glad you think that."

"You're not a *fine* gentleman," she added.

Mr. Harrow laughed.

"No, I'm not," he admitted. "I'm not polished. Plain deal's a useful wood. All the same, a gentleman's a gentleman. And I'll tell you this . . . I wish I was one —for *your* sake."

"Oh!" cried Vera, in agony. "Oh, *don't!*"

She was convulsed with silent sobbing. His humility and his honesty were both a reproach to her. They were alike scathing in her present mood. No tears came to Vera's eyes; but her face was distorted with weeping. She had never been so shamed, so defencelessly humiliated by consciousness of wrong-doing.

III

"I never meant you to take it like that," murmured Mr. Harrow, presently. "Though what I said was true, I can realise how I must strike anybody who's as—well, delicate as yourself. I can see that my way of thinking isn't necessarily yours, and I don't mind that. It takes all sorts to make a world. But I feel that my look's against me with you. I feel you're more likely to like a . . . somebody who's a bit more delicate-looking than I am. I mean, a bit of a matinée idol. See what I mean? That's all that's working in my mind. I've thought that for a long time. It's what's held me back. Only, there it is. It's not always the beauties who are the best men—the best husbands, I mean. To my understanding the best man for you is somebody sound, and not showy. I'm sound, but not showy. I think you'd be happy with me."

"Mr. Harrow . . ." Vera was almost unable to speak. Tears dimmed her eyes. But she was trying to say something clearly to Mr. Harrow, and she was bent upon saying it. "You don't know . . . You don't understand . . . I can't let you go on talking like this . . ." She could say no more.

Mr. Harrow waited a moment. Then, very quietly, he tried to help her.

"What was it you wanted to say?" he asked. "D'you want to say I'm not good enough for you?"

Vera shook her head fiercely, catching her breath.

"No!" she choked.

"Well, then, what?" He was being unbearably patient.

"Only that I'm a *fool!*" cried Vera, with scorn of herself. "A fool and a beast to let you . . ."

Mr. Harrow grew very grave indeed. His face had gone perfectly white.

"Are you in love with somebody else?" he asked, in a low voice. "Is that what you're trying to tell me?" His hands had stolen together again, and were at his chin, were covering his lips.

There was a long silence.

Suddenly Vera heard her own voice speaking.

"I'm trying to say that I don't love *you,*" she heard. "I'm not worth all the kindness you show me."

"Yes, but putting all that aside," said Mr. Harrow, "I think you're worth anything that I can do. I've been in love with you a long time. I'm not changeable."

"No!" cried Vera, in a loud voice. "I won't!"

"I think that means you're going to," said Mr. Harrow.

"It's not *fair!*" Vera went on, with a great sob.

Mr. Harrow stretched his big hands across the table and caught hers, holding them closely.

"Try it," he urged. "I won't hold you to it if it's no good. Give it a chance."

"I . . . *can't,*" whispered Vera, trying to draw her hands away. Tears were trickling down her cheeks and her eyes were dewy.

"I'm quite sure you can," said Mr. Harrow.

Vera's head was down. She was trying to conceal her swollen, crimsoned, tear-stained face, the fresh tears that were tumbling from her eyes. In her heart she was grief-stricken and shame-stricken. But she was at the same time desperate. She tugged to free her hands, and when they were her own once more she slowly wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. Mr. Harrow, his mouth pursed as if to whistle away his embarrassment, eyed her indirectly, very much troubled, but confident. Above them the great dome of the restaurant glowed and glittered, and some red-coated bandsmen began to assemble upon the dais. A few people were coming into the restaurant, and more waiters were gathering. The evening

was at hand; dinner would presently be served. Already the blood-coloured vestibule was half crowded with those who waited for guests and friends. There was a twitter of lackadaisical expectancy in the air. Their waiter hovered at a distance, anxiety in his eye.

"We must go," Vera said at last, in a tear-swollen voice.

Mr. Harrow nodded his head sharply.

"Yes. Come for a walk. We'll do a theatre."

She looked in amazement at his calmness, only half-grasping the effort Mr. Harrow was making to remain reassuringly stolid.

"You ought to despise me," Vera said, unexpectedly. "I despise myself."

Mr. Harrow looked straight into her eyes.

"I don't despise you," he said. "I'm in love with you."

There was a pause. Then her hands flew to his, were clasped, and were instantly withdrawn. As they walked out of the restaurant Vera for a moment felt Mr. Harrow's arm suddenly round her shoulders. It was a single convulsive embrace, strong and tender, and was immediately relaxed.

"We're going to have a great life," he whispered in her ear.

Almost blinded, Vera walked by his side into the busy street. She was committed. She was a cheat. She was stunned by thought of her own wickedness. Mr. Harrow smiled down at her in great content.

CHAPTER XX: MIDNIGHT

I

VERA made the journey home alone. Mr. Harrow's home lay at a distance, and he had seen her no farther than the omnibus. They had come out of the theatre into the bustle of a night crowd, had been engulfed in the crowd, and had struggled through it. Mr. Harrow had held Vera's arm for the purpose of piloting her safely, and when they were free of the jostle he had maintained his privilege. No more. At the very last, as she was stepping away to her omnibus, he had caught her hand, had brought his cheek near her own. Vera, jerking her head away, had not been quick enough. She had felt the roughness of his cheek, and then his warm lips upon her face. She had struggled free, with one quick pressure of his hand. A moment later, she had been inside the bus, hidden from him; but an uncontrollable backward glance had shown her Mr. Harrow, with his hat still raised, watching the great omnibus which held her.

Soberly, and with a sinking heart, Vera began to turn in her mind the events of that day. She was too excited to do so with any clearness, but her thoughts were wretched enough. She had no peace of mind. She was still in a chilling fever of dismay, committed to something for which she had no inclination at all, and in which she knew that there could not be any happiness. But against this knowledge she began blusteringly to set up a defence. She had been driven into it. She had not once misled Mr. Harrow into thinking that she loved

him. He had accepted that. It was for Mr. Harrow to choose.

"Oh, but how *could* I?" asked Vera, in despair. She had no answer to give herself. Only, she sat in the omnibus with bowed head, crestfallen at her own weakness and her own loss of self-respect. The strong lighting of the omnibus gave her no shelter. The steady vibration, the swaying of her body as the bus stopped and started again, affected her nerves. The dark streets and closed shops, the absence of pedestrians, gave the world a strange look to her. She was dismayed and bewildered; and when at last she reached the stopping place at which she must descend she was so filled with timidity and self-distrust that she could not at first venture alone into the familiar by-roads.

II

It was very dark. The pavements had an unaccustomed ring. The sound of her heels as she walked was faint—a little tap-tap-tapping that grew less as she hastened—was nothing; but there were others besides herself who walked, and from these she could tell how every sound echoed. All the houses looked dark. They were alarmingly sinister. And every now and then, when one of them was illumined by a street lamp, the beam was so brilliant that the house seemed marked out from its fellows.

Quickly, quickly, she must walk. She must run. What was that? A sound behind her. It was nothing. Nobody was there; only black shadows in the gardens—darkness everywhere. And then a rustling. Frightened, Vera almost stumbled. Her head was turned quickly, but nothing could be seen beside her. Nothing but the road she had covered, and the hedges beside it, and the tall

houses, swallowed up in the dimness as soon as she had passed them a little while. And yet she could not rid herself of the fear that sounds had followed her—sounds of stealthy feet. Again, faintly panic-stricken, she looked behind. The road was clear. Nobody followed. There were no steps. It had been imagination. It was nothing.

Some way farther on she saw a cat crouching in the gutter with its head upon one side in the act of gnawing a bone. Another cat sat upright, with its tail curled round its feet, in the middle of the road. Vera looked at the two cats, and thought sentimentally about them that perhaps they had no homes, that perhaps they were cruelly treated. And still she hastened on, breathless, half-sobbing, full of shame and fear and exhausted self-reproach.

She was nearly home. She would be home in another two or three minutes. The blurred knowledge of it came to her mind. And as she increased the speed of her steps, she heard sounds coming from some point on the road in front of her, and looked ahead in the darkness. The sight of a man walking quickly was reassuring. Nobody could attack her from behind if a man were coming each moment nearer and nearer. The cold shivering was diminished; Vera slackened her speed at sight of the oncoming stranger. As long as he was at hand she was safe.

At first she could not distinguish the man clearly; but in a moment she saw that he was not very tall, that he was slim, that he was walking very rapidly. And then something in the stranger's carriage impressed her, and she looked again, and her heart leapt to her mouth. For she recognised him. There could be no doubt at all. This was Mortimer.

III

Avoidance was impossible. Mortimer was at hand, was nearly abreast of Vera, when he raised his eyes. He stopped in his stride.

"Why, Vera . . ."

She heard his voice—not cold, not harsh, but swift, kind, full of eagerness. She could not be mistaken. He was glad. Her heart swelled with joy.

"Mortimer." Impulsively Vera put her hand into his, holding it tightly, her eyes starry. She could see him, see his face glowing and his eyes bright. He was as unguarded as she. For a moment only did they stand thus, and Vera had such joy in that instant of rapture as she had not known for many weeks.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Quite alone." Vera was trembling, but with delight—with vehement delight at his concern. "What are you doing here?"

They stood close together without strangeness, speaking low, as if they shared confidences.

"I've been working at home to-night. I felt I couldn't sleep. I thought I must come for a walk alone."

Alone! A feeling of exultation seized Vera. Alone!

"It's late," she murmured.

"Yes. I'll turn back with you, and go home. I was going home. Where have you been?"

Oh, they could talk such commonplace things, Vera felt; but she was thrilling at the sound of his voice, and at the sight of his dear face. She was not constrained in the darkness, but heard her own tone warm and rich with new life, so that what she said—the idle words!—was nothing and what she felt was all. Mortimer was there; and they were alone together. It sufficed. So moved was she that she began to talk impetuously of the

play she had seen, and to laugh; and everything seemed to become clear and lovely as they walked together, with the black sky above their heads and the darkness everywhere enwrapping them.

"And you," she said, at last. "Where had *you* been?"

"I had been past your house."

"Past? Not in?"

"Not in," he said.

"You'd have found Mum alone."

"It was quite dark, except a little peep in the hall."

"Did you hurry past?"

"I waited a little while. I guessed you were out."

"If I had been there, you would have hurried past . . ." She was exulting still, now in her own boldness.

"On the contrary," said Mortimer, with a kind of mock politeness.

"I think you would."

There was a little silence—for Vera a sweet silence, in which her happiness mounted. She had no misgiving. She moved beside him slowly, their steps in unison. Her heart was high, and her thoughts singing far beyond anything she had ever known.

"No," said Mortimer, at last, very distinctly. "I shouldn't have gone past."

Vera was stricken breathless.

"Why not?" It was not spoken. It was a sweetness conveyed to him by her love.

"I shouldn't have done so."

With her heart beating the gallop, Vera brought herself to question him.

"Did you want so much to see me?" she archly said.

"I did indeed," answered Mortimer, in a strange voice. "So much."

IV

He was still walking beside her, but Vera could no longer see his face. She did not dare to make any reply to his last words. She was too frightened to do so. And then, at last, she felt that she must answer them in some way; and her first thought was of Anne.

"Anne," faltered Vera. "Is she ill?"

"No," said Mortimer, in response, his tone thin and steady, as if, unseen, he were looking quizzically at her. "She's well. She's always well. But you, Vera. You're not well . . ."

"We're home," interrupted Vera. They were indeed before the little brown house, which stood silent, with one little winking light, like an eye, showing through the shining pane above the door.

"So we are." Still Mortimer's voice had the dryness which Vera had observed. "I'll go then. Be very quiet . . ."

"But you wanted to see me?"

"I've done so. Good night. . . ."

He was gone, leaving Vera standing before her home, as if a dagger had been plunged into her heart. She stood thus for a moment, and then, with a deep sigh, let herself into the house, and went forward into the kitchen. Mum sat there, fast asleep over an old newspaper.

PART FOUR: MORTIMER

CHAPTER XXI: NIGHT THOUGHTS

I

WHEN Mortimer left Vera he strode away from the house at great speed. His mind was quite clear, but his heart was beating quickly, and he was at war with himself. The sweet darkness caressed the city and made it dim; the cool air played upon his cheeks. Hidden thus, and for a moment made resolute, Mortimer heard his own footsteps, and saw the distant, unfathomable sky, and turned again, repassing the house. There was no longer a light above the door. Within the house he could see nothing.

Thus, for an instant, he stood; and presently, as if he dreamed, went slowly onward, and through familiar streets, across the high road, and ever away from his home, until at last he was upon the fringe of the Heath. The black trees lured him. He pressed on until he was within the shelter of a clump of them, and there stood, breathing fast, his arm gently about one of these trees, so rough and warm, until he heard a clock strike once. The sound did not at first penetrate to his active consciousness, but at last its echoes spent themselves in his brain. They were so clear in the silence and the darkness that they continued for a measurable space of time; and Mortimer, dreaming still, was awakened. Again he listened. There was no sound near him; but far off, where a glow of light was still reflected in the sky from the in-

numerable lamps of the city, he could hear that dull breathing of London which is never still. These trees, this grassy land, the deep and tranquillising heavens, were no longer as he had thought them. They granted him no longer the peace that he craved. Instead, as the languid air made leaves whisper and branches gently sway, they gave Mortimer the sense that he was not alone, that he had watched and guarded, constrained by the world, checked and shackled and locked into the bitter tyranny of ordinary life. Sighing, he awoke once more, and moved away from the trees, and out upon the grass, which hushed his footsteps as he went. And upon his cheeks Mortimer was aware of moisture from the air, and when he glanced upward he saw that clouds were being slowly borne across the sky by some breeze that he could not feel. There was no peace for such as he. He must stumble homeward. Very pale, Mortimer pursued his way. He went back to the roads and the houses from which he had fled.

II

Everything was dark in the road and in the house. Mortimer let himself in with a key, and bolted the front door, and crept up the stairs to the last landing. He was very silent. The lightness of his tread was extraordinary. Here, too, all was dark; but as he opened the sitting-room door he found himself suddenly in the midst of subdued light and colour. Anne, dark and tranquil, sat in a chair beside the table, and as Mortimer appeared she set down the sewing with which she had been occupied.

A glance, and Mortimer was seized with anger and contrition.

"You were awfully quiet," said Anne. "I thought it was a mouse."

Breathing quickly, Mortimer laid aside his hat. The room was cool and airy, like a chill to his mood.

"I didn't . . . I thought you'd be in bed," he said, in a tone equally low. But he was unsteady in voice and in hand, irrecoverably impatient and annoyed. "I wish you'd gone—not waited up."

"Oh, but, Mortimer! I *wanted* to wait up," protested Anne. She was upon her feet, facing him, with no hint of reproach. She was smiling. "Besides, I had some work to do, and I hoped each minute that you'd be back."

Anne looked so cool, so undisturbed, so much beyond any power of his to discompose, that Mortimer darted a glance of malice at her and threw himself down in a chair near the one in which she had been sitting. He immediately realised how tired he was. The rapidity of his walk in the warm, humid night had made him very hot; he could feel drying moisture around his eyes, and between his fingers.

"I went too far," he vouchsafed, looking at Anne's pretty head, which was set with so much dignity upon her slender neck.

"You should have let me come," said Anne. "Then you wouldn't have gone too far—and too fast."

"No. I shouldn't have gone so far," Mortimer responded inattentively. His brain was suffused with undying anger, because he had no defence but coldness against Anne. Even coldness would not avail him here.

"Do you want something to drink before we go to bed?"

Oh, why could she not leave off speaking to him? It was intolerable that he should be unable to sit in quietness, unable to quarrel, unable to blame Anne for everything that had happened within his mind, within his heart.

"No, no. I don't want anything," said Mortimer

quickly. "Go to bed now. I'm very tired and out of temper."

"Out of temper?" She was quick to catch his tone. "Mortimer. With me?"

"Not with you," he murmered at last. "Not at all with you."

"Ah!" Anne gave a breath of relief. "Shall I help you best by going?"

"As you please." He shrugged, then rose and went to the bookshelves, standing and pretending to scrutinise the titles until she should have gone.

Anne said no more. She put her sewing away, kissed him, disappeared. Mortimer heard the cracking varnish of the bedroom door, and nothing more. He turned back into the room, away from the bookshelves, and moved to the space between the fireplace and the table. Standing thus, he was at a distance from the ray of the electric light, as dim as the pictures upon the walls around him. Still his face gleamed white in the semi-darkness, and the slim blackness of his figure was silhouetted.

Thus Mortimer stood. Stealthily there came back into his thoughts the memory of what had happened nearly two hours earlier. It crept upon him with the slowness of dusk, but at last with the exactness of swift imagination, and he could picture the moments during which he had stood in the neighbourhood of the little brown house. His heart leapt again at the recollection, as it had done at the reality, of that unexpected encounter.

Suddenly the blood seemed to rush to Mortimer's head. He swayed a moment, his fists clenched and raised in the air, almost to the level of his head, in a gesture of vehemence.

"My *God!*" he cried. His face was tortured almost beyond recognition. In its expression might be read both anger and fear; but the anger, which was that of helpless-

ness, predominated. The hands were unclenched. They dropped to his sides so rapidly that Mortimer's shoulders were pitched forward and he staggered a little. In the radius of the electric light perspiration was visible upon his forehead. The grey eyes were swallowed in burning darkness, were presently covered by Mortimer's two long hands.

III

Time passed while he stood in this attitude of despair. The minutes ticked away, as if they were racing to oblivion. Still Mortimer did not stir. It was not until an hour later, when the big clock in the hall below struck two sonorous notes, that he sat down and began, as if mechanically, to take off his shoes. And even as he loosened the laces, and stooped to draw the shoes from his feet, Mortimer fell to hateful thoughts once more.

Anne! It was Anne who was the subject of his reverie. With his brain at first clouded by exhaustion and irritation; and then, as he savagely goaded himself to fresh anger, clearer and increasingly mordant, Mortimer dwelt upon Anne as if to Anne was wholly due the fever of his blood and the agitation of his mood.

Anne! Immovable, irreproachable Anne! If she had been passionate he could not have felt such confusion of love and dislike. Her passion would have solaced his own. She would have been startling, incalculable. Not so. She was incalculable, as the Gioconda was incalculable. She was a woman to learn, a woman to wrong. She was calm. Her calmness moved Mortimer to frenzy, because it plunged him into a state of mind from which he sought always to escape.

He could not reproach her. Had her will been stubborn, he could have assaulted it and flung himself with such passion to the combat that fury would have appeased

his torment. But her will was flexible—at her own command. She could give, with such innocence, and with such completeness, that Mortimer, desiring only to dominate, was disarmed. She would give always in service to her own will—never to his. What he wanted, that she gave. He could demand nothing, because it was already his. The power to destroy her was not his. Mortimer craved alone the power to destroy Anne. It was her soul that he wanted, and it was out of his command.

From the beginning it had been so. His thoughts rushed to and fro along those memories which now crowded upon him. Their first meeting, and the walks with Anne and Vera. Vera ever quick, excited, full of constraints and vagaries, a nature as shy and uncertain as his own. He had wanted certainty. He had wanted relief. Anne tranquillised him. She had power over him—the power that arose from her understanding. He could not live without the soothing hand of Anne, and her cool, fresh voice . . . He hated her. She was better than himself. She had control over herself. He could not possess her, could not crush her so that she begged for mercy, for torture. She would give him everything, but never her judgment.

They had been friends. They had been so much at ease in walking and talking that he had come to depend upon her. Intellectually, he was the stronger. No—not even there, he realised. He could make her reflect, but he could impose nothing upon her. When argument had reached its limit, she would retire, but she would never yield to him.

"Ah, but I must have *power!*" cried Mortimer aloud. His thoughts had flown faster than his capacity to assemble them. They had leapt forward while he yet struggled coherently to express them to himself. "Power!"

IV

Power. It was essential.

When Anne was with him she imposed such tranquillity upon his spirit that he was as one hypnotised. She could make him calm, could make him forget his overstrung nerves and the loneliness of his soul. Her comprehension betrayed him.

Impatiently Mortimer moved about the room, treading silently. One hand was raised to his head; the other was half extended and quite rigid.

What could he do? She had all the beauty in the world. Yes, but not for himself. He could not dominate her. He could not possess her. Always she evaded him. Yes, but not in such a way as to excite his passion. With Anne evasion was no lure. He pictured himself seeking amid the labyrinth of that calm dignity. No wanton, no mocking sprite; but Anne. Anne, who could not be seized, because she was stronger than himself.

Mortimer's hands were brought sharply together.

"I shouldn't be thinking all this if it wasn't true," he muttered. "I shouldn't be thinking it if Vera was dead." Vera! The thought of Vera appealed sensually to him. Vera could be tortured; she could torture. Mutually, they could wound and pain each other to extremity. Vera! And he was married to Anne! Mortimer gave a short laugh which held no mirth. His mind was back again gnawing at the thought of Anne. "I hate her," he exclaimed, half aloud. "She's too strong for me. If I could crush her I should love her. No. If *she* were stronger I should worship her . . ."

"She's *cold* . . . She's cold and virtuous . . ."

There was a long pause. Mortimer was quite still. He was deep in a state of thought from which no conscious thinking emerged. At last he raised his eyes once more.

He seemed to take a long breath. His eyelids, so white and heavy, fell suddenly, as if to cool the burning of his eyes.

"I'm inferior," he thought, unexpectedly. "I'm inferior to her. That's what I can't bear!"

V

At last Mortimer crept to the door, and along the darkness of the landing to the bedroom. Again the doors gave out that startling crack of varnish, but no further noise broke the stillness. In the bedroom, when he switched on the light, Mortimer saw Anne lying quietly in her bed. He could not see her face, because one arm had been thrown up as if to shield it from the light. From Anne's lightly regular breathing he supposed her to be asleep.

Quickly Mortimer undressed; and in the darkness lay quietly in his own bed. But he was restless, and unable to lie still. At one instant it seemed to him that he heard a movement from Anne's bed—a sigh, a faint stirring;—but when he listened there was nothing. Only from without he noticed the faint hiss and patter of rain, and the almost imperceptible dunting of the holland blind, blown by the wind at the open window.

How hot his hands were! How hot and aching his head! As his eyes closed Mortimer saw great shapeless things advancing towards him and diminishing strangely before he could clearly grasp what they were. His eyes burned. He tried not to think any more, but only to sleep, and coaxed his breathing into the long steadinesses of repose. In vain. His brain was too excited. It continued to throb with the same thoughts.

To have Vera in his arms—not passive as Anne was, but like a fluttering bird—yielding because her own pas-

sion was as great as his—yielding, not for his delight, but for her own solace . . . Vera—that was what he craved. Vera's change of mood. Her coldness, her unexpected warmth; her shyness . . . Mortimer pictured Vera as never calm, as for ever seeking pain and pleasure, as he did. He imagined himself causing Vera pain; imagined the sweet estrangements, the bitter conflicts, the wonderful hours when estrangements ceased and passion rose. He felt, in thinking of Vera, a sense of power. He could most crudely molest and injure Vera. He could crush her; impose his will upon her. Savagely, Mortimer pushed away from his mouth the stifling bedclothes, and breathed more freely. His arm was now outside the coverlet, his burning eyes fixed upon the light sky, wide open, staring . . .

Vera; and he was married to Anne.

Brutal hatred of Anne surged to his heart for an instant. His arms were rigid. His whole body was rigid. Voluptuously, he hated Anne.

Then the rigidity of his body relaxed. With a sharp sigh he turned over, and saw Anne lying near in her own bed. The arm was no longer across her face, which lay open to his gaze. Anne was quite still. Her eyes and lips were tightly closed. She looked entirely unconscious of all the turmoil in Mortimer's breast.

"Cold," repeated Mortimer's thoughts. "Cold. *She* doesn't care. She doesn't even *like* me. I wonder why she married me . . . Yes, I *wonder!*" It was another subject for speculation. It made him the more bitter. "My God, I wonder what she did it for!" He laughed, bitterly enough. "I suppose she had some reason. Yes, I bet she had. But *what?*"

It was long before he slept at last.

CHAPTER XXII: IMPORTANT THINGS

I

IT was Saturday evening. All the afternoon Mortimer had been reading, or attempting to read. The words before his eyes had been clear, and he had understood each word; but the sentences composed of these words had been meaningless. He had been occupied with the same two pages all the time, striving so to fix his attention as to retain memory of what he read. Impossible! At first his ear had been strained for every smallest sound that Anne might make in kitchen or bedroom; or the curtain at the open window had fluttered, or the window itself had given out strange faint noises under the pressure of a strengthening breeze. Later, he had been so irritable that he had set the book down, only to take it up again in haste as Anne slipped into the room.

Why must she creep about? Why couldn't she walk loudly and distinctly? He looked down at her shoes; and so up from her feet to her head, avoiding the glance of her frank eyes. She was dressed for going out of doors. Upon her head was a little hat which threw her eyes into shadow from every aspect but the one which Mortimer's sitting position commanded. He could not deny her pretiness—the slimness of her body, the delicacy of her carriage . . .

"Ready?" asked Anne, in a tone of expectancy.

Mortimer felt a pang. He knew what they were going to do; and yet some hideous spirit of contrariety made him assume an air almost of disdain. He could not command himself. It was as though he sought to pretend

that she had interrupted a chain of most abstruse thought, whereas in reality it was her unaffected eagerness to be gone which had offended him. It was her good nature, and her simplicity, that made Anne affront his sense of greater sophistication. A strain of pedantry in Mortimer, which he well knew to be there, caused him to desire to repress this naturalness, this calm, in Anne. She had asked the question, "Ready?" as if he were as full as she was of concern with common things.

"Ready? What for?" demanded Mortimer, in a sharp voice of exasperation.

"Surely you haven't forgotten! Oh, Mortimer! I reminded you this morning!" cried Anne. "We're going to . . . to twenty-five Snaresbrook." It was her old home.

"To-day?" Mortimer dropped the book to his knee, and stared as if amazed at her. Then, with an ugly resignation: "Oh, Lord!" Anne waited, so that Mortimer's teeth closed with a snap. At the corners of his lips appeared that little trembling which he could never control. He knew it was showing; he knew that he was parading his irritation; and he could not quickly recover from it. Indeed, the effort to do so was half-hearted. At last he said: "Must we go?" and watched her face for some response.

To his surprise Anne sat down. He could no longer see her eyes. They were shaded by the narrow brim of her hat.

"Is there any reason why we shouldn't go, Mortimer?" she asked quietly.

II

The words sent a shock through Mortimer. What did she mean? His heart plunged a little. There was poison

in the question—poison from that acute mind. Instantly, he had recovered, and was armed to conceal excitement.

"No reason that I know of," he coldly answered. "Except that I'm not anxious to go." He looked away from Anne. There was the slightest pause, which he knew convicted him of lying.

"You used to like coming, you know," Anne ventured, in a low voice.

Mortimer smiled. He was not really smiling, but he pretended to smile.

"Things were different then," he said, in a false voice of lightness.

"Used you never to like Mum and Dad and Vera?"

Vera! How her voice dropped at the name. Mortimer tried again to glimpse the eyes so hidden from him under the brim of Anne's hat. In vain. He saw only her lips, which were so fine and so soft and clear that they communicated nothing but her own sweetness.

"Yes," Mortimer deliberately said, in reply. "Yes, I liked them. I still like them."

"You see, I love them," Anne answered. "I wouldn't ask you to go there against your will; but you haven't really been since we were married. It hurts them. They're very fond of you, and very sensitive. I know it would be horrid to have the family always with us; but there's nothing of that sort possible. Mum never goes out——"

"I know. I know," interrupted Mortimer, with impatience. "Of course I know. I expect I'm very difficult."

"Do you *want* to be?" asked Anne, unexpectedly.

"Want to be what?"

"Difficult. If you don't like going, we won't go together after this. To-night we must go, because we've promised."

"Must?" His brows were up.

"Oh, don't be silly, Mortimer. We've promised to go; and they've probably got a feast for us." Anne jumped up from her chair, turning away from him as she did so. "Hurry up!" Mortimer rose in turn. "You'll find a clean collar and hanky on the chest of drawers," added Anne, impudently.

For a moment they stood in silence, looking at each other as only strangers and those who are very intimate can do. There was a curious struggle between them, as to the triumph of one mood or the other. Then, in spite of his annoyance, Mortimer found himself smiling. He walked with laggard steps to the door, and so to the bedroom, as if her glance followed him and cramped his limbs. There, indeed, upon the chest of drawers, were to be seen the clean collar and handkerchief which Anne had laid ready.

"Damn!" muttered Mortimer, conscious of defeat. He caught sight for an instant of his own white face as it was reflected in the mirror. The puckering of the brow, and the turn of the lips, horrified him. Again he swore, and a sense of having been ridiculous smothered and increased his inward anger. "What a puppy I am!" he exclaimed. "What a *puppy!* Damnation!"

Hastily, with repugnance, he turned from the mirror, and began to wash. The cloud of grievance still clung to his spirit; but a single phrase of Anne's was causing him to flinch and tremble as nothing else could have done. Anne had said: "Do you *want* to be?" The question cut his vanity like a sword. "Damn Anne! Damn her!" Was that the love she had for him? The boasted love! A love that sneered, that flicked home a cruel taunt! Ridiculous! She did not love him. She couldn't love anybody. She was too cold for love. She turned everything to ridicule.

III

They made the journey almost in silence. The wind was fresh but warm; and in these sheltered roads, among staid red houses, there was nothing of life to be seen. At one point a little boy in a sailor suit ran races with a dog, but when the dog grew excited, and barked and leapt at the little boy, a woman came out to the gate of one of the houses and called both boy and dog indoors. Mortimer took a sharp glance at the woman, whose hard face was flattened with cares.

"I shouldn't like to be that little boy," said Anne. "Or the dog."

Mortimer made no reply. He did not understand what had made Anne say such a thing. Not all people were as quick to turn all to criticism, to ridicule, as Anne was. She apparently could not restrain herself from commenting—from the pleasure of vicarious feeling. Could any woman? Could Vera?

"Although the houses they're putting up now are horrid, they *are* different from one another. These are all alike—they're like lozenges," said Anne.

"Not everybody cares as much about being different as you do," answered Mortimer, with the impulse of repressiveness upon him.

"I don't try to be different myself," objected Anne.

"Don't you? I thought you did."

"No, you didn't. You thought you'd annoy me by saying so. But you don't annoy me. I should like to see the differences between individuals recognised."

"They *are* recognised. Only groups of people are the same."

"They're not recognised in the way I want. In houses, for instance."

"You say they *are* being recognised in the newest houses."

"That's not what I said. The differences in the houses aren't in accord with the personalities of those who live in them. That's what I really want. I'd like to go into a house and feel it wasn't just any house, with fashionable furniture. I'd like the house to be a setting for the people in it. I wish *we*'d got a house like that."

"D'you say your father's house is a setting for the people in it?" asked Mortimer, with conscious frigidity—with the desire to wound her.

Anne sighed.

"I don't know. Perhaps it may be," she answered soberly. He could not tell whether she had been wounded or no.

A moment later they were in front of the house, and the ugly brownness of its two storeys rose before them.

IV

The remembered scent of the house stirred Mortimer's pulses. He was at once full of restlessness, and hung his hat upon the stand in that dark little hall with something that approached dread. The walls and the ceiling of the hall came close to him; they were suffocating in their ancient ugliness. It was one thing to adore the secrets of an old building, and to feel that walls and beams and panellings could tell romantic tales of tragedies and beauties seen through the generations. These walls were quite different. There was something furtive in their withholding of revelation. They knew so much, of such seamy and squalid happenings; they were like midwives, or old maids who pried themselves into a state of obscene concern with every horror. Mortimer could hardly re-

strain a shudder. And in that shudder was a retort to Anne. This must have been the true reason for his unwillingness to enter the brown house, he told himself. The real reason out of a thousand reasons.

And, even as Mortimer pretended to think that, he knew that he was lying. The real reason of his long absence was his passionate love of Vera. So much was clear to him. Was it clear to any other, beside himself? Was it clear to Anne? Or to Vera? Or to Mum?

Still in the darkness of the hall, Mortimer heard the opening of a door, and saw Vera straight before him. He knew she was there. He could not see her face; but his heart was soft within his breast, and his head rose higher. The secret horror of the tight, constricted walls flew away. He stepped quickly forward.

V

But Vera was not alone. At his coming she drew back against the wall, and only her eyes were brilliant. They searched his face. Her hand, as he touched it, was lifeless. Her body was rigid. All colour was gone from her face, so that he could see nothing but her eyes, the light of which Mortimer could not endure. And behind Vera were the others. There was Mum as he had always known her—the insignificant little woman with a constant preoccupation with innocent and anxious things. There was Dad in his clean shirtsleeves—very large and spick-and-span, with the heavy bandmaster's moustache and a great nose with hairy nostrils. Dad was freshly shaven, and looked as though he were not only freshly shaven but dressed with care in his most gorgeous suit. A lumpy watch-chain was looped from one waistcoat pocket to a special buttonhole, and so onward to another waistcoat pocket, until it resembled that chain which goes

from pillar to pillar beside the drive of an English gentleman's country house.

"Well, Mortimer!" roared Dad, in affable greeting. "Here again, I see." His enormous hand engulfed Mortimer's fingers.

"Yes, at last!" reproved Mum.

"I've been so awfully busy," stammered Mortimer, glancing from one to the other of them. "It's taken us some time to settle in. My books, you know . . . It's been shameful." He could tell that they responded to his charm—to the diffidence of his manner, his voice, and the smile which sprang naturally to his lips. Dad beamed upon him with startled, expressionless eyes. He uttered a husky, kind, meaningless laugh.

"Oh, well, we know what being married is. Eh, Mum?"

"We've *been* married," cautiously assented Mum. "You don't look as if being married had made much difference to you, Mortimer." She was evidently dubious, as if she had made an instant comparison with Mortimer's former state. She meant, that in the matter of health he had not changed for the better.

"You can't see!" rallied Mortimer. He knew that Vera was watching him, that she never ceased to regard him with intensity. Nothing shone in her but her eyes, which were effulgent. Mortimer could not face them. Self-consciously, he turned to Dad, moving quickly, as it were, under the microscope of their affection.

"I don't like those hollows in your cheeks, Mortimer," pursued Mum in a little dull voice.

"Oh, the boy's all right, Mum!" Dad puffed out his chest as though he were applauding himself for being a finer male figure than Mortimer. "He'll fill out as he gets older."

Anne was with them at this point, and heard the end of Dad's speech.

"We don't want him fat, Dad," said she, demurely.

"Here, what d'ye mean! D'ye mean *I'm* fat?" Dad assumed an air of archness which made him appear to be like a gambolling ox. He gave the serious man's version of a comic grimace.

"She *couldn't* mean that," said Mum smartly. "And even if she did, it would be only for fun, as you well know."

Dad gave a roaring chuckle.

"The women!" he cried, with a familiar wink. It was as if he had said: "We poor married men!" He seemed full of the thought that Mortimer and himself were both married, but the thought carried no innuendo. "However, get some food inside you, Mortimer. That's the best thing to take out the creases. Yes, the creases out of life, as well as the creases out of the waistcoat. Eh, Mortimer?" He seated himself.

"You're very gross, Dad," said Anne, beside him at the table. "With your waistcoats."

"Well, I believe in a good meal," said Dad. "I grant it. Some people turn up their noses at food. Not me! Food and insurance;—and where's your anxieties? If you want to avoid worry, guard against it! An empty stomach makes you miserable. Bad sleep makes you miserable. Fear of the future makes you miserable. Why be miserable?"

"It's like a leaflet," Anne murmered. Only Mortimer heard her. He heard all Anne said, though he was listening to Vera.

"Some people are unhappy, Dad," Vera was saying quickly. "Or they're ill."

"Ill? Not enough to eat!"

"Sometimes too much," suggested Anne.

"Not a bit of it. If you can't eat, go to the doctor. He'll ask you if you're sleeping. He'll ask you——"

At this Anne checked him. Mortimer could see her oddly warning finger raised. He could see how Dad took notice of her, how he laughingly subsided before her reproof. Anne again! Anne, and always Anne! Mortimer flung himself back in his chair.

"I don't think I've ever known Dad so coarse!" cried Anne, wonderingly.

"Oh, Anne!" This from Mum, who had been amused at Dad.

"At any rate," persisted Dad. "Get some food inside you, Mortimer. It'll take away that tired feeling. You'll sleep better. Of course, for you, being in a bank, the future isn't worth worrying about."

"On the contrary," objected Mortimer, forced by his spirit, against his will, to contradict.

"Oh," cried Dad; "how's that?"

"There are other things in life besides eating and sleeping."

"Details." Dad pooh-poohed Mortimer's truths. "Details."

"The most important things of all."

"Do tell us what they are, Mortimer!" Again it was Anne. As though she were baiting him! Well, Anne should hear what were the important things in life! He would tell her. He would seem to be telling them all; but in fact he would be telling Anne alone. She should learn that coldness and ridicule, contempt and reserve, were not the truest qualities in life. Anne thought they were. Anne was sure they were. She was wrong. In that as in other things. Wrong. She should hear otherwise.

"The most important things of all," said Mortimer,

moistening his lips, which had become dry with sudden excitement. "They're things you don't suspect, Anne."

It was a bitter enough beginning. It startled them all.

"Oh, Mortimer!" He did not know from whom the protest had come. All he knew was that he must express the burning unease that was driving him to hostility.

"First there's freedom," said Mortimer, coolly. "Freedom, which you would call selfishness."

"Oh, *that* kind of freedom!" exclaimed Anne, under her breath. He was the more angered. His voice grew the cooler—until it held insolence.

"Freedom to disregard others in one's own search for happiness. Liberty of the soul. There's passion—all the emotional energy that this world of safetymongers is blanketing. There's adventure. There's renown. There are poetry and danger and splendour. There's despair. There's real love and real hatred. Anguish and horror and exultation. These are very different things from the creeping timidity of the herd. You don't like them, eh? You don't like them, eh? You don't like them?"

Trembling, with his lips parched, and his mouth dry, Mortimer smiled at Anne. He had been carried quite out of his ordinary rather diffident carriage by the exciting effect of the words he had used and the emotions these words had aroused in himself.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Mortimer dropped his eyes, and began fumbling with some bread that was upon his plate. He was instantly ashamed to think that he had allowed himself to be so fierce. Even in that silence the fever cooled, and left only its aftermath of weariness, of touchiness and disgust.

"Have all those things got anything to do with beauty, Mortimer?" asked Anne.

He stared imperiously at her.

"Everything," he answered.

"Ah," said Dad, drinking his tea. "Hm." He took a peep at Mum, and another at the ceiling. He scratched the corner of his mouth with a meditative finger. The tips of his moustache were between his lips.

"They're too exciting for me," admitted Anne. "I want happiness."

"You can't get that by insurance," cried Mortimer. "It's the mistake the modern world is making. 'Safety first'—it's suicide."

"Hm," said Dad, thoughtfully. "Sounds to me like anarchy."

"Mortimer doesn't mean it," breathed Mum.

"Yes, I think he means it," explained Anne. "Only I don't think you *can* disregard other people. You're too dependent on them. If you disregard them, you—you haven't any friends. You are the one to suffer. As for all the feelings——"

"You couldn't understand them," said Mortimer.

He thought he could detect reproach in her eyes. A kind of cruelty in him rose up in triumph. At last he had wounded Anne. At last he had injured her. And he was ashamed. Not glad, or triumphant; but ashamed. He could not look back at her, but watched the tips of his fingers resting upon the edge of the table.

"I couldn't understand *all* of them," said Anne. "But what I was going to say was that, though I hate resignation—well, I don't like spectacular things."

"Spectacular?" It was Mortimer who pressed her.

"Yes. They seem hysterical. Not the things, so much, but . . . perhaps it's the common desire for them. I don't mean at all that *your* desire for splendid things is common . . ."

Anne seemed to be thinking. She had evidently not been meaning to return rudeness for rudeness. She had not been wounded at all! The reproach he had seen was

not, then, reproach? Mortimer bit his lip. His shame had been unneeded. Anne had accepted his estimate of her capacity. She had not been wounded because she had ignored the ugliness of his tone. She——

"I think I sympathise with men," Anne was continuing, "men who have to work indoors when they'd much rather be out-of-doors, risking all sorts of things——"

"Don't you believe it!" cried Mortimer. "They don't want risks."

"Don't *you?*"

Mortimer was pierced. She had defeated him. He was humiliated. Stumblingly, looking back at Anne with his expression slowly changing, he answered her.

"I don't know what I want myself. I'm only sick of the deadly weariness of the life I have to lead."

"Hm. Neurasthenia," grumbled Dad; and brought warmth to Mortimer's cheeks. Mortimer saw the quick sympathy leap into Anne's face. It checked his irritated response to Dad's comment. Diversion came from another quarter, however.

"I think what Mortimer says is true!" cried Vera, in an incoherent way. "It's absolutely true. I agree with all of it." Vera's face was scarlet. Tears were in her eyes. Her lips trembled.

They said no more upon that subject.

VI

When they were going, late at night, Mum had retired to the scullery and Dad was in his chair by the fireplace. Vera and Anne were upstairs together in the bedroom. Mortimer, craving for air, was at the front door. The breeze had flickered out, and the evening was again sultry, so that even with the draught blowing in through the half open door only a slight flicker shook the small gas-jet

in the hall. Mortimer stood in silence contemplating the slip of roadway which could be seen from his post. It was a greyness—not dark, but without luminous quality. Shadows might pass here unperceived. Everything was gentle and mysterious, and the sounds of the evening swam together into a murmur. He breathed deeply.

Almost as he did so, Mortimer was startled to find that he was no longer alone at the door. Vera stood near him, so close that although he did not touch her he was aware of the light, hurried breathing, the quick rise and fall of her bosom. She was so sweet, so tender, so mysterious and intoxicating to his senses. . . . Mortimer felt his heart rise. He was tempted to surround her with his arms, to press her close, to kiss the delicate throat, burying his lips in that soft and exquisite flesh. Hardly breathing, he swayed towards her, so that their shoulders were together. He for an instant took her hand, which was burning. It trembled within his clasp, and was fluttered free.

". . . so lovely . . ." Mortimer heard himself murmuring—as though in those broken words he sought to bring solace to his wandering heart. "I . . ."

"You'll come again very soon," she whispered to him. "Soon."

Mortimer, straining his ears, could catch no other sound.

"No, I can't come," he whispered in response. His head was shaken.

"Please." It was a sigh. He was suffocating. His heart was thunder.

Again he whispered, "Is it so much to you?" and caught with difficulty the almost inaudible reply:

"Everything."

Nothing more. They were no longer alone. They were apart. There was the noise of steps in the hall.

Dad and Mum and Anne were immediately grouped in the doorway; and Mortimer, in a stupor, allowed himself to bid farewell and follow Anne. He did not know—he never could remember—what he said and did thereafter. Only those words filled his ears and filled his heart, that was beating so unsteadily. Confusedly, he walked at Anne's side, and no anger against her now ran like an irritation in his blood. The words had been spoken. They sang all the time in his head, like a message from infinity.

Darkness hid Mortimer's face. Darkness was wrapped about him like a mantle.

CHAPTER XXIII: AT THE BANK

I

EVERY morning Mortimer walked from the lodgings out into the busy, roaring, high road, and down towards his daily work. He found himself always at this hour amid a great crowd of people hurrying to catch trains and omnibuses; but he himself had no need of hurry, for his work lay close at hand. The bank was upon the corner of a street not twenty minutes away from home. It had a face of grey stone, and in a puny way it was handsome enough. Its windows bore upon them amid a sort of icing the name of the bank, and were otherwise sufficiently opaque to hide the office and the workers from any too-inquisitive passers-by. Above, where the stone facing was exiguous, were flats of an extremely respectable character. Through the swing doors within the porch could be seen a polished counter protected by strong, thin, brazen bars; and when Mortimer entered the office his own place at a long desk was immediately open to the eye. He had no privacy.

Upon this desk the heavy ledgers could rest at ease; and here all day Mortimer worked with others—Jack Stephens, Roland May, Peter Louch—with nothing but routine to engage his attention. Accuracy in copying figures; care in deciphering names; with exactitude his task began and ended. From morning until late afternoon Mortimer entered figures in ledgers and pass-books. No responsibility was his—that was all in the hands of others. Money did not reach him, but only the signs and symbols of money. Daily, at the counter, he saw

Hodge and Leonard scrutinising cheques, counting Treasury notes, and weighing paper bags full of coin; shovelling silver and copper money, using rubber stamps, checking amounts and with blue pencils making marks upon bags and papers. He saw them chatting in the grand manner with customers of every kind, from rich men to commissionaires, from girl clerks to busy, funny shopkeepers. Often enough, Mortimer laughed with Jack Stephens at their courtesies, for Hodge and Leonard were old hands, in training for higher posts, and both were aristocratic. They had easy, confident manners, and perfectly manicured hands. They knew all who entered the bank. Mortimer knew none.

He knew nobody outside the bank except Anne and Vera, Mum and Dad. It had been the same all his life. From his father he had been early estranged by a sense of superiority, and his mother he had never known. She had died while he was yet young. Mortimer's father had been an easy-going genial old man—more than middle-aged when his son was born—who was full of old-fashioned jokes and sentiments. When Mortimer, home from school, had encountered afresh these unpalatable traits, he had shrunk from his father. He could not respect anybody so lacking in parade of dignity and importance. Books had drawn him apart. Books, too, and a dislike of games, had separated him from his schoolfellows. He had been lonely all the time—at home and at school. When others had played, he had read, both widely and carelessly, despising those who played for preferring animal exertion to the more delicate sport of measuring one's intellect with that of the most ingenious of mental gymnasts. Yet in spite of his preference of books to games, Mortimer was not what is called bookish. He was nothing of a student. His reading had been too odd and too wayward to do more than confirm his

egotism. He had read enough to make him contemptuous of the taste of others, but not enough to make him either learned or humane.

And from the time when he had first entered the bank Mortimer had been in London, while his father, peacefully engaged in his retirement upon the study of the rose, had remained at ease in Leicestershire. His father had been dead now for three years. From what money remained when all had been paid—his own share having been anticipated long before in the shape of his school-fees—Mortimer had received exactly twenty pounds, which he had spent in a couple of evenings. He had no relatives, and his only male friend (with whom he was in no sense intimate) was Jack Stephens. His life, therefore, after his father's death, continued as lonely and as dissatisfied as it had been before. He was conscious of his superiority to other men, but he had not the power to convince other men of their own inferiority. For men he appeared to have no charm, and he knew that at the bank he was not much liked. The reason he never guessed: only the fact; and the knowledge served to make him still less cordial than he had been with the others. It confirmed him in his disdain for the majority of men.

For women, on the other hand, Mortimer had great attractiveness. Common girls would stare at him in the street, would brush against him, would look back into his face as they passed. If there were two of them together, they would encourage each other to make audible remarks, or to laugh immoderately, so as to draw Mortimer's attention. Even better-bred girls would show awareness of him—the small, half-shy turns of the head, and the half-revealed glance, the general alert consciousness, which indicated that their interest had been aroused.

It had been so with Anne and Vera, although with these two there had been legitimate acquaintance before

friendship. They had all three met at an open-air party three years previously, just after the death of Mortimer's father; and at once they had found some inexplicable common ground. The attraction had been mutual. To Mortimer, even, it had been strongest of all. For once, he had made the first advance, which in itself put this acquaintance upon a different footing from any other. In the first place, Mortimer had been grateful to the girls for their frankness and for an absence of flirtatiousness, and he had made an appeal to Anne the like of which he had never before made to anybody. He had asked for friendship. It had been promised. More; it had been given. What had now followed was the result of that friendship. Friendship in time had slipped to another plane. But Anne and Vera had always been his best friends, those to whom he was most drawn; and this, in spite of all, they remained.

Did they in fact so remain? Was Mortimer still as grateful to them as he had been three years ago? Gratitude is one of the most evanescent of emotions. It is sometimes followed by hatred. He thrummed his fingers upon the desk, wondering. It was a difficult question to be answered by a man who for love of one sister had betrayed the love of the other.

II

Day by day, amid the books and papers of an alien world, he had written down figures and figures and figures, until figures had become a torture to him—until when he closed his eyes he continued to see figures jumbled chaotically together within his blind vision. He had dreamed of figures over and over again, and still dreamed—of nines pursuing fours, and threes eights, of sevens pleading with twos and noughts harrying ones—

all seeking to be converted from what they were to something other than what they were; the nothings to somethings, the odds to evens, as if it were as much a craving among figures as it is among humans to be even rather than odd. Mortimer had dreamed pyramids of figures, and interminable caravans of figures crossing deserts without limit. Figures that could not be counted, figures that changed their places in line and column as if idiocy itself had rendered them distraught. In his dreams figures were always malcontents.

It was otherwise in Mortimer's daily life, for here he was himself the malcontent, oppressed by figures. He was bound prisoner to them. Men he could pretend to ignore, rising in his disdain to heights of arrogance, and dismissing them with a mental gesture that might have been regal. Women he would dismiss when he chose, and he had done this in the past, with impunity. In the years during which he had been with the bank, Mortimer had known a number of girls. They were necessary to his nature, which demanded some form of excitement, some form of cruelty, for its satisfaction. But the girls he had known were all of a lower social order than his own; they had all been girls to whom his grace and his aloofness were in themselves fascinating. Never, until he met Anne and Vera, had Mortimer known girls who were even approximately his equals in intelligence. His experience of men and women had been alike in this, therefore, that in every case they were subject to dismissal at his sovereign will.

Not so with figures. Whatever they did, he must follow. It was a servitude. Figures humiliated him, because they owned no domination. They were beyond his control. Mortimer hated figures with mortal hate. From figures he had sought escape. Figures had plunged him now into a situation from which he could deliver

himself by no adroit twisting, no manipulation, no potion or magic.

What was he to do?

III

The office was not busy this morning. Mortimer left his work, and gazed around. Opposite him, upon the farther side of the great desk, Jack Stephens was sitting idly watching two or three people who were gathered at the counter. Jack was lazy and good-humoured. He had a clean, fair face, with a short sweep of straight hair, almost flaxen in colour, across his forehead. His face was pink; his nose was long. When he smiled, as he often did, his teeth could be seen to be both white and regular. He was a member of one of the bank's rugby football teams duing the winter, and played moderate cricket during the summer. As a bank clerk he was less efficient than he was as a three-quarter back or in the long field. As a friend he was casual and unsympathetic. But he was the only friend Mortimer had.

At the counter, Hodge was listening patiently to a verbose old woman with a wrinkled face and a hat like a pincushion, who owned thirty or forty houses in the district. Leonard was away on his summer holiday, and Harris, the manager, had been keeping his eye upon the counter in Leonard's absence. Harris was not there now. He was in his little office, occupied in his own work. Mortimer, idly attending to the chatter of old Miss Merridew, was attracted to the throbbing of his own heart.

How quickly it was beating! Without realising it, he must have been thinking of Vera.

IV

He pictured Vera, and he pictured Anne. Anne quiet, resolute, cold, hard . . . Vera emotional, shy, vehement, soft and easy to dominate . . . Thus he pictured the two. And as he did so Mortimer gave an explosive shrug of despair. The situation was impossible. It had become impossible by the steady progression of happenings. Wearily, he sighed again; but his teeth were ground together. Impossible,—yes; but some way must be found. Some way *must* be found . . . What way? However hot his blood, the brain must be cool. Cool, the brain! Cool!

Mortimer began to think quite unemotionally. He could think very clearly and without vagueness when it was necessary for him to do so—clearly and coldly. As he thought, his eyes narrowed. He seemed in that hot summer day to be like a strange and incalculable cat, peering upon the world with Oriental immobility. First, Anne . . . Then Vera . . . Always himself. First Anne . . .

"What's up, Scott?" he suddenly heard Jack Stephens call.

"Nothing," answered Mortimer, instantly alert. "Why?"

He could see the puzzled look upon Jack's innocent face, and he laughed at its unconscious reflection of something which must have been in his own.

"Way you were looking," said Jack, peering still under the rails which ran horizontally over the desk.

"How was I looking?"

"Like this."

Mortimer was conscious of a shock when he saw that bland pink face assume a glance full of malice.

"Nonsense!" he cried.

"Fact. The camera cannot lie, my boy."

Mortimer, merely shaking his head, returned to his work. But he was uneasy. Had he really looked like that? Horrible! He was struck by a sharp thought. What if, in Jack's eyes, he looked malignant?

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Mortimer. "Have we got to that?" He was oppressed by the knowledge that his expression had aroused comment.

For a long time he pretended to be working, although his mind was occupied with affairs quite other than those of the bank. Still, he was not willing that Jack should guess the turmoil into which his mind had been thrown. He must hide his thoughts. But how to hide them when they were beyond his control? How to hide them when they lurked and leapt from unsuspected hiding places?

Had he really looked like that? It wasn't true. And yet . . . and yet, you couldn't tell. A shiver ran through Mortimer. Slipping off his high stool, he went down to the other end of the desk, and began to search in a drawer there, as if he had lost something; whereas in reality he was intent upon nothing more than concealment of the agitation into which he had been thrown by Jack Stephens's abrupt question.

CHAPTER XXIV: FRENZY

I

IN the afternoon, when the light work of that summer day was over, Mortimer went out into the hot streets. It was the hour of tea-time, and the high road was almost empty of pedestrians. Now and then a motor omnibus roared and rattled past him, or a private car, or a van; but for the most part there was a lull in traffic. Presently, as the City trains arrived, and as the omnibuses from the West End came thick and fast upon each other, the scene would change. The wide pavements would be crowded, the roads black and red and grey with flying vehicles. There was calm everywhere save in Mortimer's heart.

Jack Stephens had hurried off to play tennis; the others were gone he knew and cared not whither. They were outside his interest, which was concentrated within. As he strolled up the high road, past empty shops and silent walled gardens, Mortimer was exulting in the fact that he was alone. He was alone, and could think now without the betrayal of his thoughts. At the bank, they could all watch his mood, his expressions. He must be on guard. At home Anne, most dangerous of all, might observe without remark. Anne was incalculable. She was as enigmatic as the Gioconda; as all-seeing . . .

Mortimer laughed. She was blind here. She might guess, and guess again; but she was imprisoned in her own nature. She had not the key to his! Anne—finite Anne. Sensible, intelligent Anne, who had not that leap of imagination that darted hither and thither and made

all things known! Poor woman, in bonds, and glad of her shackles! Without them she would be helpless.

Vera loved him. So much was clear. Yes, it was clear at last. It had not been clear before; but it was no longer hidden. She must have loved him when they met that day. Must? Or had it taken the marriage to awaken her? He must find out some day . . . It would be sweet to discover, to learn just exactly . . .

She had been cold, obstinate . . . She had repelled him. Oh, granted that he had been a fool. He had been a fool to doubt it. Fool indeed! And then, driven by need, he had turned to Anne. Was that it? There was nothing creditable to himself here. No, nothing creditable, indeed. But was it so? Take the question again. He had needed—what? Oh, he had needed them both. Of that Mortimer was very well aware. He had needed both. He still needed both.

In the midst of his realisation of that, Mortimer was brought up short.

Anne—if Anne had been wise, she could have . . . Anne was wise enough, no doubt, to be a fool. Fools were the wisest, and the wisest people were fools. Anne—give Anne her due—was what he needed; but not what he needed most. She was not adaptable. She saw and thought, but did not feel. She was fundamentally frigid. What then?

He would not punish Anne. He could not make her feel. If he could flog her, she would feel. But Vera; Vera was exciting. He could release all his passion with Vera . . . Ah, he *loved* Vera! Not to torture her; not to create pain as a living substance which should link them for ever; but to worship, to adore . . .

Adore Anne? Never! Anne would laugh at adoration!

II

Homeward turned Mortimer, so disturbed by his musings that he was glowing with excitement. Homeward, and with dread at his heart for the glance of Anne; yet with some eagerness also. He was by no means so cool as he had been. You couldn't dismiss a personal relation as you could dismiss a servant. There was much to be done here; much to be felt. Mortimer began almost to relish the sensation which he was enduring. Not altogether. He was unappeased. In retrospect he might relish; but not at this time. Too much was beyond his control.

Moreover, he was afraid of Anne. He could not ignore her.

In this state of mind he climbed the stairs to their rooms, and took up a book, sat by the empty fireplace, with his back to the window. What book, it did not matter. He could not have read. His eyes were fixed upon the unseen distance, and the thoughts went on and on in his mind like a long chain, sometimes knotted, sometimes doubled, never the untrammelled reflections after which he was seeking.

Every movement made Mortimer start. He turned his head very often lest that sound might be Anne upon the stairs—Anne at the door, entering. He would have to get up and kiss her, and then wait while she prepared the evening meal. Then they would sit down—he and she—and talk as though nothing were the matter—as though he were content with this marriage that Anne had determined upon—as though they both were content. Was Anne content? Mortimer did not know. He supposed she was, since this must be the sort of marriage she had desired. He could not tell. Impossible to read Anne's motive, guess at her triumph. Suffering he felt sure she

could not feel. She *could* not feel it. Why should she? The marriage had been arranged by herself, for her own ends . . . It must, therefore, be what she wished.

Well, that was another question altogether. Had Anne attained her own wish? It was all very well to suppose so; but he could not be sure. She seemed happy; but Anne would seem to be happy in any circumstances whatever. She would seem to be happy because she did not know what happiness was. She was too lymphatic for ecstasy.

Anne ecstatic! Mortimer laughed again, bitterly. Excellent Anne. But ecstatic? His mouth drew down in a dry smile. He felt his own dryness. Then dismissed it. No: it was possible to sneer at Anne, but one must not go beyond irony, for the sake of one's self-respect. Irony! Mortimer laughed again. He felt superbly ironic in his association of ecstasy with Anne! As well speak of the ecstasy of George Eliot! Of Mr. Collins! Of Freeman the historian! Of Samuel Smiles! Sensible Anne.

She was so much beyond his irony! That was the secret inspiration that brought pallor to Mortimer's lips. He sprang up. The thought was not his. It had been spoken by some voice within the room; some voice hidden devilishly within his heart!

He could not keep still thereafter; but walked rapidly about the room, full of nervous constraint which made him feel that he was going mad. As he walked, the pocket of his coat caught against the table, and the tablecloth of serge dragged. An ornamental vase containing flowers, which stood in the centre of the table, pitched over, broke . . . The flowers were scattered, so that their pale green stalks were heaped upon the table. All across the cloth ran a flowing pool of water, spreading wider as it ran. The noise of dripping told him that the

water was trickling from the table to the bare polished boards underneath. Stupefied, he gazed at the wreckage; and in that instant Anne came unexpectedly into the room.

III

"Hullo!" she exclaimed. "Had an accident?"

"This damned thing . . ." Mortimer angrily pointed. "Look at it!"

"Never mind. I'll wipe it up in a minute." Anne kissed him frankly. "It looks a lot worse than it is. How are you? Headache?" Then she darted out to the kitchen, returned, mopped the tablecloth, collected the fragments of the vase, fell upon her knees, and began to mop the wet from the floor. The broken glass made quite a considerable heap in her dust pan, and this heap she regarded gloomily. "I'm afraid Mrs. Earle will be angry with us for breaking her vase," said Anne.

"Mm. I expect she will." Mortimer, still agitated, was rueful. "Tell her I did it."

"I certainly shan't. It doesn't matter to Mrs. Earle which of us did it."

"Damned thing's got no balance. I just caught the cloth, and it went over."

"I don't expect it was very expensive. Perhaps I can replace it. I'll run out after supper, and see if Todd's have got one like it . . ."

Mortimer no longer listened. He had lost interest in the vase. It was in any case an ugly vase, and it had a very small pedestal, and it had caused him annoyance.

"If you get one," he said, "don't put it on the table. Put it somewhere else."

He did not look to see what Anne made of his instructions, but resumed his interrupted pacing of the

room. He had not glanced at Anne during the whole of the scene. Her presence had been enough to relieve him of responsibility for the broken vase; but it was otherwise a source only of shame. He was glad when she went to change her dress and prepare the supper.

IV

When they finally sat at table to a cold meal with a fresh salad, Mortimer, sitting opposite to Anne, could not help looking at her. She was rather flushed and constrained. But in her expression there was no coldness towards himself. On the contrary, she seemed to be unusually shy, as if by such demeanour she would make an appeal to him.

"Hm. She won't," thought Mortimer, stubbornly. Strange how indifferent he was to her! There were times when he was not indifferent to her—when he was subject to some thraldom, some charm which she exercised. Not now. That was ineffective now. He had been suffering too greatly to pay heed to the devices by means of which she had so often conquered. She would not succeed. He was resolved not to speak, resolved not to show that she still had power. In fact, she had no power when he steeled himself against her. Another women, making demands upon him, might have had power. Anne made no demands. It seemed that she was self-sufficient. Well, she should receive nothing from him.

He moved in his chair, watching her keenly. Yes, she was indeed flushed. For the first time in his experience, Anne showed outward sign of distress. Upon his account? Upon Vera's? It appeared, upon the account of neither. What then? He was curious. But he would not ask. It should be revealed at Anne's pleasure, or not at all. The colour became her. The cotton frock which

she wore—in which he had many times before seen her—became her also. Anne looked exceedingly pretty. Coolly, Mortimer appraised her beauty. To himself he admitted that it was considerable. And yet, as he made the admission, Mortimer saw another face—not as that face, wasted with sickness and anguish, now was, but as it had been;—and his heart failed him. His teeth met sharply. His eyes were cast down.

And as if that change in his regard had released Anne from her constraint, she looked up suddenly, caught her breath, and spoke.

V

"Mortimer," said Anne. "I'm afraid . . . I'm afraid I shan't be able to stay at Kilburn's."

The remark was so unexpected that Mortimer jumped in his chair. The curiosity he had felt until that instant was at once dispersed. Kilburn's! What a crumbling into triviality! Irritation came rising up again in his breast.

"Kilburn's?" he cried sharply. "How's that?"

Anne hesitated.

"I'm not very happy there," she said.

Mortimer heard the breath hiss between his teeth as he drew his lips deprecatingly together.

"Oh, Anne!" he urged, with obviously suppressed impatience. "I don't see how you can give it up."

"Of course I'd get something else."

"Could you?"

Their eyes met. Mortimer saw a singular expression of tightness upon Anne's lips. She looked away. He could not tell what her thought was.

"I expect I could get something else," said Anne, very seriously, almost drily.

"Better get it before you——"

"That's just it. I wonder——"

"Oh, you'd have to," said Mortimer. "That would be much the best."

"I'd like to leave at once."

"At once? But how impossible! Anne! Do *think!*" He was exasperated. As though she could not see that it was quite out of the question! How extraordinary she was!

"Mortimer, I *have* thought." She spoke very low.

"But you've been all right there for so long." His tone was sharp. It really seemed incredible that Anne should suddenly take a dislike to her work. Most extraordinary. What could be the object? "You see, I simply can't support the two of us."

"I know you can't do that," replied Anne. "I don't suggest that you should."

"You seem to be doing so."

"I'm not." Mortimer saw Anne shiver and draw herself together, as though in a kind of nervous disgust.

"I don't see what you propose." He again spoke sharply, indignantly.

"I wanted your . . . I wanted to know how you thought——"

"I can tell you that at once. I think you ought to stay."

"Even if . . ."

"Whatever the cause. I suppose it's not as acute as all that."

"It's rather acute," said Anne. How strangely she was looking at him, her eyes dark and reproachful.

"Well, I don't see what's to be done. What *has* happened?"

Anne continued to regard him with that look of pain. He could not endure such a glance. Pulling his knife

and fork abruptly together, and frowning, he made as if to leave the table.

"Just something rather uncomfortable."

"Oh, it'll blow over."

Anne made no reply. She gathered their plates together, and went into the kitchen for the sweet and the sweet plates. She was away rather a long time, and during all that time Mortimer, growing each instant more unsympathetic, was fidgeting. He was filled with nervous exasperation, born of his own mood, and heightened by this new complication.

"What nonsense!" he muttered to himself. "It's perfectly silly. *Silly!* As though I hadn't got enough to worry me, without this sort of thing. Perhaps it's something serious? It couldn't be. With Anne, it couldn't be. She's quite competent. No. It's . . . it's simply because she's married. That's all it is. She thinks I ought to be able to keep her. She wants change—wants to be at home . . ."

Anne came back into the room.

"You see," Mortimer began immediately. "It's not as though we'd got any money saved——"

"No," said Anne. "Mortimer, don't think that it's just a whim of mine——"

"Well, I feel . . ." began Mortimer, still looking away from her, but bent upon speaking frankly. "I feel that it's simply . . . That—well, that if you weren't married, you'd stick it . . ."

Anne stared at him.

"Do you really think that?" she said.

"Yes, I do." He was defiant.

"Oh, Mortimer!" Anne laughed. "No, listen. If I weren't married to you I should certainly leave at once."

"But I don't see how you *can!*" he exclaimed. "It's all very well to——"

"I didn't want to suggest it; but of course I could always get money at home."

"At home?" He was furious. "At home! Well! So you're going to suggest that it's *I* who made you stay at Kilburn's! You're going to suggest——"

"Isn't it?" asked Anne, suddenly.

"I? Why, what are you thinking of, Anne?" Mortimer's voice was thick with anger.

"If I weren't married, I should leave at once."

"Do you really——" Mortimer checked himself. The whole thing was lunacy. "Anybody would think——"

"I'm trying not to . . . not to wound you, Mortimer." Anne was desperately white.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Mortimer. It was savage laughter, harsh and ugly. "Are you going to say you're tired of marriage? Are you going to say that our marriage was something . . . Why, Anne! Are you going to blame *me* for our marriage?"

"Blame?" He hardly heard her voice. "What d'you mean, Mortimer?"

The imperiousness of her demand silenced him. Instead of replying, he stared back with anger to which she could not attain. At last:

"I mean," he said, very bitterly, "that I'm tired of this conversation. I don't know why you started it; but I know that I'm going to listen to no more of it. I'm going out." He seized his hat.

"Mortimer!"

Too late. He was through the door and out upon the stairs. He did not stop until he was many yards away from the house; and then, panting, he slowed his steps because he could no longer walk with such furious rapidity without staggering.

VI

Never had Mortimer been so excitedly angry. He was trembling from head to foot, and as he walked he ejaculated the venom of his thoughts.

"She blames *me!*" he said, over and over again. "It's . . . it's *laughable.* She has the impudence . . . the impudence. God damn it, am I to be nothing but her slave? It's simply incredible! It's fantastic . . . Oh, but it's quite impossible. Nothing could continue with such an impossible person. She's evidently got it into her head that I'm some weakling who can be dominated all the time—right and left! A weakling. Whatever I may be, I'm not that. No, no, no, no. I really . . . Well, that certainly helps me. It *helps* me, I say . . ."

Mortimer's eyes gleamed. He laughed again.

"It helps me to understand. Helps me to *act.* Yes, by Jove . . . As though *I* were responsible! Some paltry little tiff at the office, and *I* am to pay for it! Never! Why, anybody would think I was a millionaire! No, mistress Anne! Oh, no! What did she mean . . . 'wound' me? It makes me laugh!" He laughed indeed to suit his words; but the laughter was a goad to his anger. "Why, one would think that I had *urged* her to marry me! She did it of her own free will. She married me! Would to God she hadn't. Would to God she'd had the dignity not to . . . What a woman! Well, she's ruining *my* life! Is she? Not she! I won't *let* her ruin it! I'll take my own course. By Jove, I'll let her see whether she's got the power . . . Whether it's she or I!

"It helps me! Now I know what to do! It's what I wanted, this! It's what I was waiting for! Nobody

could blame me! Nobody's got any right to blame me! . . ."

So Mortimer thought as he strode along, quite unconscious of his path, of the hour, the night. He was for long bereft of the power of thinking coherently. When he recovered the power he was in a state of trembling false coolness. It was not real coolness, but a bitter and obstinately resolved frigidity. And in that mood he continued his walk, with a plan of revenge forming, retiring, and again forming in his mind. His mind, which now, in this condition of heat and dishevelment, was fit only for stratagem and hideous imaginings.

CHAPTER XXV: IN THE WOOD

I

IT was the following day. In the morning there had been a haze over London, and although this had lifted it still hung very heavily in the air. The sun, when it pierced the haze, showed as a flame. As a flame it burnt up the air, so that the city was stale with the smouldering heat.

Mortimer had done little work that day. He had tried to work, but he had been consumed with fire. That same burning heat of the sun which had turned his world into a suffocating, oven-like misery, had set a-smouldering the fires of his nature. It was impossible for him to work. He had sat endlessly at his desk, with a pen in his hand. Outside the office he had heard the staggering roar of the motor omnibuses, and the sharper grinding of smaller vehicles; and when the swing doors of the bank had been opened to admit clients there had rushed into the office the smells of tar and petrol and hot roads and metal . . . all poisonous, and all overpowering. No breath of fresh wind had recalled to Mortimer's mind the sweeter warmth of the countryside. Only the sweltering of the town oppressed and crushed him.

At length the day crept to afternoon, and the doors of the bank were closed, and he could hide the fact that his work was behind and could leave the office and go forth to the streets. And as he went out he walked in a thin rim of shade close to the walls, as if for secrecy, and went northward until he reached a telephone booth, which he entered. How stifling the booth was when the door

was fast! He could not breathe. Eagerly, Mortimer sought for a number, which he spoke into the instrument; and then listened. He was sharp with the telephone operator who answered him. He was excited. His whole demeanour was strange and furtive. Deeply agitated, he kept turning as he stood in the booth, glancing ever behind him, out to where he would have been able to see any listener. There was a long delay. At last, as if it came from a great distance, he heard a faint answering call.

"Hello-o-o . . ."

"I want Miss Treacher."

"Who-o-o?" The faint voice—that of a careless boy who was too bored by his work to pay attention to what was said.

"Miss Treacher."

"What department?"

"Oh, God! I don't know!" snapped Mortimer. Hastily, he thought: "What's the name of the man?" At last: "Mr. . . . Mr. Harrow . . . Mr. Harrow's department. Quickly, please."

"Hold on . . ." There was a click, a buzz.

Mortimer waited, trembling.

II

An hour later he stood within sight of Blankenburg's; and began to walk up and down in the shadow. The fact that he had to wait humiliated him. It humiliated him always to be subordinate, to have to do with subordinates. It humiliated him to realise that those he knew were all subordinates. There was not one among them who was free. All, alike, had to be called hurriedly and secretly to the telephone when he needed them, had to smother and curtail their conversation because they might

be missed and needed by those who employed them. They conversed with him in fear of reprimand from some superior. All were slaves.

It was a humiliation the more that he should be so furtive in love.

So this was business! This life in which, so that he could see Vera, he must submit himself to the impertinence of boys, the questioning of other people in a department . . . The life in which she, answering him, must be hurried, secret, because she was forced to speak where she was overheard, because she was not supposed to wish to speak upon the telephone during business hours. The minutes were regarded as stolen. For a wage she had sold her time and her attention for so many hours a day.

Were men and women helots that they were expected to confine their lives to extra-office hours? Mortimer exclaimed at the picture. His mortification was extreme. Was this really an age of democracy? Of course it was not: every employer demanded feudal rights over his servants; but he would accept no feudal responsibility. He demanded work for stipulated hours, claimed the right of service and dismissal; but the employé was dependent for his own safety in life upon whatever could be extorted from something wholly external called "Government"—government, which, being composed largely of employers, would give only what it could no longer deny, and which thereupon cunningly employed a horde of other helots to maintain helotry, and brand it with shame. A vicious circle indeed! There was no tyranny more abject than the tyranny of slaves! It was the tyranny of fear. Poor slaves! Poor slaves indeed. They knew not that they were slaves. But what humiliation for all who could feel!

Fuming, Mortimer continued to walk about in the

shadow. At every step he turned and regarded the big building upon the corner of a side street. From a door in that side street he guessed that Vera would come. She would not come from one of the main entrances, but from somewhere which would emphasise the inferiority of her position. And he was powerless to set right this indignity that was put upon her. So far from putting it right, he might call down upon Vera some further indignity, because he had presumed to suggest that she could be, in office hours, a human being who might have interests outside the office.

The evening crowds of homeward bound clerks began to bustle in the highways. There had been people walking quietly past Mortimer when he arrived, and for some time thereafter; but in the hot late afternoon they had been few. And now, suddenly, as though a thousand bastilles had fallen, men and girls poured about him, brushing against his body and jostling among themselves, as if they vehemently engaged in universal obstacle races. Hateful people with slave minds and the exuberance of dogs out for a run . . . With dislike, he drew farther back, against the window of a shop, still watching that door in the side street which had a round, hanging lamp above it. The crowds became more dense; the traffic heavier, noisier, more stupefyingly overloaded. It was now impossible to see the door continuously. In the attempt to do so, to keep his eye acutely levelled, he was dizzied and agitated. Yet he must go no nearer. He must wait here, watching, lest any should see him.

At last he espied three girls who came quickly forth from the little doorway. They were small to Mortimer's eye, which was bewildered by the constant variation of focus; and they were unrecognisable. They spoke among themselves, walking quickly. So much he could detect. They were like mechanical dolls, antic and tasteless.

Their clothes were ugly in cheap simulation of the mode. They were as immodest as prurient concern with respectability would allow. He detested such girls. Then others came from that same door—girls and men, in headlong struggle. He could no longer distinguish between them, so sheeplike was their flocking; all were such as might be seen at this hour blackening every main street in London. With cruel animosity Mortimer frowned upon the groups. It was among these people that Vera perforce spent her days. These, and others like them—close-packed, self-important . . . Intolerable!

For a few minutes there was a stream of Blankenburg's staff, in which it was difficult for him to do more than realise that they had faces and figures. All crowded to the end of the side street, paused for an instant as released beetles might do, and separated with common gestures of farewell, laughing, turning away and colliding with other people, scattering like leaves, and being caught up into the general stampede that caused his eyes to ache with the strain of watching it. He could imagine every arch "Bye-bye. . . . Be good!" "Oo, I'll *try!* . . . Hee hee!" and the malicious picture which formed in his mind gave neither pleasure nor ease. Slaves such as these, entirely satisfied with their fortune, or, if dissatisfied with it, vaguely and impotently so, were unworthy of sympathy. He was filled with contempt.

Then Mortimer saw two figures, and his eyes were immediately at gaze. He was not near enough to be sure at first that they were together, but in a moment it became clear that they were talking. What! Talking—with this familiarity? He was stabbed. He had not realised such a possibility. Vera, with another man? So . . . so . . . One of the two (he was not mistaken, in spite of his emotion) was Vera. The other was a tall thin man. A tall man whose air was proprietary—was

impertinent . . . What the devil! He saw Vera look quickly about her, as if confused, perhaps in search for himself; he saw her speaking earnestly to the man; saw the man hold her arm, press it, bending a little over her. Great God! It was unendurable. It was not to be borne. Flushes of anger made his heart throb and his cheeks burn. Then Vera was free, and the man was gone, raising his hat, smiling . . .

Mortimer was already halfway across the road, hastening to the spot at which he had last seen Vera.

III

They had met, and both her hands for an instant were within his. At once, Mortimer's anger died. His suspicion died. Instead, there was only tumultuous delight. He was filled with a glory, a pride that dismissed every other emotion. Such ardour was in his heart that it spoke from his eyes, and there was no need of a greeting between them. Vera, quick and shy as a little bird, was all responsive. He adored her. She was faintly flushed, and her body, so slight and tender, was inclined to his with such rapture that for an instant, in all that hurried scene, amid the ugly press of humans and the tall buildings which everywhere glittered their assembled display back to the sunshine, Mortimer and Vera were alone together, and the noisy world forgotten.

For an instant; no more. Immediately they were almost parted by the eager flood of pedestrians, torn asunder, pushed, driven . . . Mortimer was forced to release the hands he held, to take Vera's arm, to hold it tightly, not only to appease his present need, but as well so that he might lead her in safety from the pummelling and battering of the throng. Quickly, the two of them raced together across the road, and into a deserted street

which led nowhere. Mortimer saw nothing of the street. It was drab, a cul-de-sac, and quite shadowed from the burning sunlight. Here they could breathe, and did so, walking slowly, with Mortimer's hand still caressingly about Vera's wrist, and their shoulders gently together.

At last:

"I had to see you," breathed Mortimer. "I can't stand not seeing you."

Their eyes were ardent. Their lips trembled.

"It's beautiful," whispered Vera. "You ought not; and yet, just once, it's so sweet." She seemed to him pathetically childlike, so that Mortimer was humble before her. He was swept by a passion of love and pity. "Just once," she repeated, as if sighing, as if pleading.

"You see, I'm so unhappy," Mortimer told her. "Awfully unhappy."

"I, too . . . Poor dearest!"

"Everything's so wrong."

"*This* is wrong," Vera said, gravely, hesitating.

"No. It's not wrong." He spoke aloud, in a defiant voice, for the first time. He had persuaded himself, and he must persuade her. So much Mortimer knew instinctively. He was the more vehement. Vera, her eyes upon his face, her face glowing, dark with tears, still shook her head.

"This once," she repeated. "Although it's wrong."

They had come to the end of their lonely street, and were in face of a high wall. For a little while they stood, only half aware that they had ceased to walk; and then, mechanically, they turned, retracing the steps they had taken, until once again they were upon the verge of that unrelenting crowd.

"Oh, Mortimer . . . Not there . . ."

Shrinking she indicated the masses of people. Mor-

timer stopped. He had been dreaming. He had been dreaming, and yet he had been swiftly planning. His mind was made up. He was full of sudden purpose, was in a fever to be gone.

"Let's . . ." He looked up at that sky, grey and heavy with the afternoon's heat. "We can't stay here. There's nowhere . . . I thought we'd take a train somewhere, and go into the country."

It was out. He was burning, trembling. His lips were dry. Even as he had tried to make his tone casual, it had been impossible to keep his voice quite steady. He felt the smallest recoil of Vera's wrist.

"Oh—but, Mortimer!" She was doubtful. She must be won. For this he was resolute. Passion was consuming him.

"I must—I *must* see you; talk to you. Dear; this once——"

They were her own words, employed fiercely and deliberately, at white heat. He watched her, his heart beating. Vera turned to him helplessly, her face drawn. He could see how ill she had been, and how unhappy. She had longed for him. She was unable to refuse. Mortimer knew his power. Vera could not refuse. Temptation was too great. Yet he saw that she wavered. Her smile was distorted, so that she seemed almost to grimace at him in the attempt to control tears.

"What can I say?" she whispered. "Mortimer!"

Mortimer felt his heart leap. His whole body was taut. He almost laughed in triumph.

"That you'll come!" Oh, he could be masterful with Vera. He could lead her to the path of his desire. Vehemently he persuaded her. "Vera, dearest!"

Her face for an instant was averted. He saw her nod faintly, saw the colour steal to her cheeks. Her hand clung tightly to his own. With difficulty Mortimer re-

strained himself from vehement embrace, from incoherent words of love and victory. The strain relaxed, he breathed rapidly, turning his face away so that Vera might not read what lay deep in his heart.

IV

In all the journey that they took by train they were never alone. The slow train jolted heavily from station to station, and always the same people sat closely-packed in the compartment. Vera was crushed against Mortimer. He could feel the softness of her body, and its warmth, and knew that she had slipped her arm under his so that they should be linked together. Hungrily, he watched the stolid faces of the fellow-passengers—men who read their evening papers, and sighed at the evening's warmth, and pushed back their hats from moist brows . . .

Gradually the train, running more freely, began to pass through long stretches of peaceful green. Everywhere Mortimer could see this magical green, spreading wide over the landscape, brilliant in spite of the sunshine which had burned the air. In the distance heavy trees swam together into softness, banking up against the sky as green and as delicate as moss or maidenhair. Within the carriage everything was warm and close; there, beyond the houses, up to the skyline, there was air to breathe and beauty to nourish. His eyes were fixed upon the distance. He could see the sky burning from blue to opal, with the promise of lovely starriness amid a pale night canopy; could see the softness of all that foliage as it would be when they were beneath the trees and gazing heavenward through the thickly clustered leaves. Hurry, train, hurry! He urged it forward as a driver might have done, longing for what was to follow when the journey was over

and the haven of those woods was reached. His heart swelled and his eyes shone. Unconsciously, he pressed more closely to his side the slender arm which lay so sweetly within the shelter of his own.

V

At last they were out of the train and into the warmly scented air of the country. Puffs of white dust rose as they stepped along the roadway. The hedges beside them were white with the same dust, but before them was the deep green of summer foliage. As Mortimer led the way they lost their fellow-passengers, who all turned towards the town. Only he and she were turned elsewhere, to the rising land, away from every dwelling, to the shade and beauty of the hills and the woods.

Mortimer held Vera's hand. He could feel her arm pressed against his. Looking down he saw how quickly she walked to keep pace with him. Presently they left the road, and went through a sort of narrow green lane, which ran between very high hedges. Through a gap in one of these hedges they mounted to a softly rounded hill, and skirted that, until a small wood lay before them. It was not here that they were to stop, for a girl and some children were in the wood; but farther away from the town. They crossed other fields, and went through a swing-gate, and ever upward, until from a hill they could see many miles of sheltered landscape spreading to north and south. Far away, to the east, was the town from which they had come; a little mass of red and black roofs, with arms stretching this way and that as the town grew and carried its dwellings beyond the original limits of its size.

Now at last they were remote—far from every eye. And as they followed the path that Mortimer had chosen

they came again to a wood, in which at last they might rest, warm and breathless with the exertion they had undertaken. Above, heavy masses of leaves made everything cool and dark. Beneath their feet was a soft carpet of old leaves, richly brown in the shadow. All was green and brown, silent and obscure. And as if they had waited only for this time, the two of them with a single movement were within each other's arms. Their lips met. Mortimer felt Vera's body yielded wholly to his embrace, and drew her the more closely, his cheek to hers, his strength masterful. Other life there was none: only this long embrace, for which as lovers they had been these many days starving.

VI

When Vera would have withdrawn from his arms Mortimer saw upon both her cheeks the heavy tears which she had so long restrained. In her throat he could see the fiercely pulsing revelation of her excitement. Her cheeks were scarlet. Her eyes glittered. She was languorous, fainting, eager for renewal of that kiss. Never had he been so drunken with allurement, so bold and tender and confident. Mortimer's temples were throbbing. His hands were unsteady. His eyes were insatiable—ruthless and insistent. The blood seemed to have been drained from his face.

And at last, when Mortimer forced her to be seated upon the felled trunk of an ancient tree, and when they sat upon this rough support, they still clung together as if they could never be tired, and murmured soft, speechless messages to each other, and gazed with wonder into each other's eyes.

Mortimer could see shyness and boldness slipping in and out of Vera's eyes, and the tears which still trembled

there. He could see her lips, which had swollen under his kiss; and her bright cheeks. And as they gazed they smiled, and at last, sobbing a little, as if in embarrassment of delight, Vera cast herself once again within the shelter of his arms.

"I'm ashamed," she whispered.

"My sweet."

"It's all wrong."

"The wrong's not ours," cried Mortimer, holding her tightly.

He felt the start she gave.

"Not ours?" she murmured. "Then whose?" And when he did not answer, she repeated: "Whose?"

"Who's to blame?" he asked her. "Do you think it's I?"

"No, no, no!" cried Vera in a trembling voice. "Never. It's I. I should have been kinder. I didn't know. I was confused——"

"You were unkind," he said. "You were cruel."

"I was horrible!"

"But we were handicapped," persisted Mortimer.

"We . . . By what?"

"By *her*."

"By Anne?"

"Of course. You see what happened."

"She was jealous . . ."

Mortimer kissed the soft lips, the white throat.

"Don't let's talk about that," he said. "Let's talk about what's to be done."

"Done? Oh, Mortimer!" Vera shuddered within his arms. He felt her cheek pressed hard to his own. He must convince her. He must make the truth apparent to her.

"I can't live without you," he whispered.

There was a shuddering sigh.

"It's not life," came faintly.

"We shall both die . . . Dear, think what we can do. Can we meet like this? Not for long. She'd find out. She sees everything."

"We couldn't hide it." Again that heartrending sigh. "Dearest, I don't want to think. I want to forget everything."

There was a long silence, in which Vera's face was hidden. The beating of her heart was less violent. The colour slowly ebbed from her cheek. Mortimer kissed her again, and the colour crept back to her cheek. He could feel the increased rapidity of her heart-beat.

VII

As they sat thus in the silence of the wood, dusk began to gather. Within the wood the green and brown faded, as if a mist had risen. The silence deepened. Faint rustlings heralded the coming of night. Only Vera's thin dress made a gleam of light in the darkness, and at length even that was not clearly to be distinguished. Mortimer continued to sit with his arms about her, and his shoulder supporting her head, until his arms ached with the burden, and his own head drooped. He was stiff through sitting for so long in one position. He could feel the beating of Vera's heart, and the beating of his own, thick and fast and irregular; and as he peered into the gloom it was as though a mist was before his eyes.

If he moved this sweet burden would no longer be his. He was afraid to move. He must not lose her now. She was his own. Silence. Vera half lay against him, as one in a stupor. The darkness increased. All about them was greying, blackening. The sky above was opalescent, but the leaves were so thick that he could see through them, glancing steadfastly above, only the small-

est specks of opal, deepening, deepening. There were no stars.

Uncontrollably, his weary body jerked. Vera started, drew herself away, despite his endeavour to keep her to his breast, and sat erect. Her hands were to her cheeks, as if they burned.

"How dark it is," she whispered. "We must be going home."

"Not yet," begged Mortimer. "My dearest . . . Not yet."

She turned to him. Her face gleamed.

"It must be late," he heard her say, drowsily.

Pleadingly he answered, his breath upon her ear.

"Not yet, my own. It's early. There's no need to go. I was a little stiff. That was all . . ."

"Poor Mortimer." Her voice was faint. "Poor Mortimer." She touched his hand, but sat apart, and twisted her fingers free from his attempted clasp.

They were both very hushed in the gloom of the wood. They could not speak aloud. Both were afraid to speak, lest this spell of rapture should be broken. Sighing, they stared into the haunted darkness. When Mortimer rose to his feet Vera also rose, and stood erect. She did not now repulse him, and in the silence he put his arms around her once more. They kissed, and again; and as that kiss grew passionate Mortimer felt Vera sway deep into his arms, sway and cling, as though the fire which ran in his veins had been communicated to her. Fiercely, he kissed again, bruising her lips, his blood mounting. His clasp tightened. She was lost in his arms, lost and fainting . . .

No sound in that silence but their rapid breathing, and the thundering of their hearts.

"Mortimer!" He heard Vera cry aloud in sudden fear. "Mortimer. Let me go!"

"I love you." He would not let her go. Never again would he let her go. "My beautiful one. My beautiful one . . ."

"Listen, dear . . ."

"My own!"

Suddenly Vera's body grew rigid. She struggled.

"No!" she screamed, in the suffocating voice of one who dreams.

"I love you. My sweet . . . You *kill* me . . ."

"But Anne! Mortimer!" He heard the horror in her tone.

"Damn Anne!" cried Mortimer, choking. "I hate her!"

Slowly the rigidity of Vera's body was relaxed. Her arms were about his neck, clinging. She was soft and yielding in his embrace. Her breath came quickly. He drew her ever closer, kissing hungrily, savagely, until both were carried beyond thought or fear or understanding of what they did. They were bathed in the impalpable darkness and the gentle shadows of the wood.

PART FIVE: VERA

CHAPTER XXVI: REACTION

I

EIGHT o'clock. Mum was calling. Vera started up, rubbing her eyes. Before her was the familiar blind at the window of her bedroom, and at the sides of the blind she could see the morning sunshine. The room was as usual; yet she herself . . . In bewilderment, sitting upright in the bed, her heart beating faster with the suddenness of her awakening, she looked down at her hands. What had happened? She was alone. And Mortimer? Mum was calling. It was so strange . . .

Then her heart sank. Something terrible had happened. Mortimer . . . The blood rushed to her face and neck. She swayed. Everything was suddenly clear in her mind. Memory was vivid. Much of what had occurred it would not face, but slipped away, cowering; as Vera recalled hotly the smothered kisses of farewell, when Mortimer had been so eager to leave her; her own ghostlike tiptoeing into the house and up to bed; her collapse and bitter secret weeping. Oh, the shame, the shame of those furtive acts! Vera shivered. She covered her cheeks. They must have happened such a little while before. The tears were not dry upon her face.

"Vera!" came Mum's call, from below. Mum was in the hall: she must have one hand upon the stair rail, while her face must be angrily raised. Vera saw the flick of Mum's eyelids. The tone was sharp.

"Coming!" Slowly Vera slid out of bed, and stood for a minute wearily beside it. Then she darted to the mirror,

to look at her betraying face. It was white; her eyes looked swollen. Instinctively she shook her head. That was no face for secrets! "What have you done!" she whispered to herself; and saw in the mirror for a second time that shaken head of misery.

And now what could she do? There was such press of memory and fear and stratagem upon her mind that she was bewildered. Say . . . say what? What *could* she say that would deceive Mum? There was nothing. A sob of hopelessness rose to Vera's lips. Blindly she groped her way about the room. Her body was without strength; her head ached. Shuddering, she put one hand to her burning cheek.

The floor creaked a little under her step. She knew that Dad would be asleep in the next room, and that she must be very quiet; and the thought intimidated her. Fear fled across her mind, and in an instant her nerves were raging in panic. She was shaken from head to foot.

II

Even when she was dressed, and ready to go downstairs, Vera still hung back. She was afraid to face Mum. She had no reasons to give for her lateness. Mum would look strangely, unkindly at her; would question her . . . Everybody would read her shame.

She *must* go. How could she go? Mum would ask her, and she would stammer, growing hot all over. Mum would be like lightning, peering through her black-rimmed glasses . . . Mum would say . . . With a quick movement Vera seized the handle of the door, ran out upon the landing, and down the stairs; and so she reached the dark little kitchen quite breathless. She was flushed, too, as if she had been hurrying.

Mum was not there. She was in the scullery. Vera could hear the noise of dishes, and the slamming of the oven door.

"Goodness, I *am* late!" she exclaimed aloud, in a false, light voice. But the voice was so false that it made her tremble afresh in fear. For disguise she looked down at the table. Her place was already laid, and the sun was pouring so brightly through the kitchen window that the china and even the old knives and forks were glistening.

"Late indeed!" added Mum, coming from the scullery with a dish. "Both last night and this morning. I don't know what's come to you, Vera!"

Vera looked up with an effort at coolness, broke down, her cheeks flushing, and turned away.

"I'm late this morning because I was late last night," she said, painfully.

"Yes, I expect so. Where were you?"

"I went home with Miss Westgate." It was defiant.

Mum proceeded to rub her hands upon her coarse apron, before serving them both.

"Good gracious! That's something new, isn't it?" she grumbled in a preoccupied way. "Never done that before, have you? I thought you didn't like the girl."

Vera stole a quick glance. Mum was not looking at her. Mum had not really been paying attention to what she said. Mum was thinking of something else. How extraordinary! How fortunate!

"She had a party," Vera explained. Then, with a glance at the clock: "Ohoo, I must hurry!"

"You'll take your breakfast first, my dear," said Mum. "And never mind *what* Mr. What's-his-name says. No, Vera, you *are* to. I can't have the two of you."

The two of them? Vera shied away from that.

"But, Mum! I must go!" she cried. "I'm——"

"You're looking a bit better this morning," volunteered Mum, with a keen glance. "You've *been* looking awful."

Better? Vera checked a groan. Better! She said nothing. A moment later she felt her whole body leap with horror, as her mother continued.

"Anne was here last night."

Anne! My God! She could bear no more. Not knowing what she did, Vera jumped up from the table, dropping her cup heavily back into its saucer.

"Mum, dear——" She could hardly speak. Chokingly she added, "I *must* go"; and with that she was out of the kitchen, into the dark hall, and upstairs again to the bedroom. It took several minutes to put on her hat, so useless were her trembling fingers; but at last she was in the street, and for this time at least she was safe.

III

The journey that followed was made in a stupor of anguish. Impossible to forget the shock which the mention of Anne's name had given. Vera knew not how to endure the torture. A dozen times she rose to her feet upon the swaying omnibus, thinking that she must descend from it because she could no longer sit still without screaming. And then the fact that she must not fail to go to Blankenburg's checked her and forced her down again into her seat.

Anne! Chokingly, Vera crouched against the vibrating side of the omnibus. It was the worst realisation she had as yet had. It started terror once more, so that her blood froze.

What had Anne said? Anne had been at home, talking to Mum. What had she said? Had she spoken of Mortimer? Had she a suspicion? Did Anne know—guess

. . . *anything?* If so, what was to become of them all? And if she had *no* suspicion, what was still to happen? It was unthinkable. The mind recoiled from possibilities.

Sick at heart, Vera at last descended from the omnibus, and ran towards the office. It was all she could do to restrain herself from loud cries of horror. She was not fit to face the observation of those who would watch her arrival. Half demented, she ran on through the sultry streets, seeing nothing, panting, unconscious of her flushed cheeks and dishevelled hair. What cared she for the amusement of strangers?

It was already late, and at the office everything she did would be remarked. All the clerks would look up from their tasks and follow her with their eyes; all the girls would stare, and say "good morning," with an air of grievance against her . . . Their prying glances would pierce each sign of her misery. Among themselves they would exchange words, looks, every cruelty of the pure. They would see her state, would at once know that she was beside herself . . .

It happened so. She went through the doorway in the side street, and the doorkeeper who sat there all day in his little box greeted her and entered in the record—not accurately, because he liked Vera—the time of her arrival. Then, with trembling legs, up the stairs and through the big, lofty, clerks' office, full of long desks and petrified human beings. They all stared at her in sham connoisseurship. She was almost weeping; there was a sick feeling at her heart. She gained the typists' room, and for some minutes in their little cubicle struggled to reach some appearance of composure. Sobs began to rise in her throat. She checked them. They came again. Again she checked them. At last she was able to still her quivering lips, to force courage to her eyes. Now!

"Hm. *Some* people keep nice hours," said Miss Smart,

half aloud, in a lively manner. And looked severely at the wall, with a half glance at Miss Westgate and Miss Ellis. When Vera did not answer, save with a desperately pretended smile, and when she began to clean her typewriting machine, concealing her face as well as she could, Miss Smart rubbed her own nose reflectively with the back of a forefinger. "What *Alfred* will say, one of these days, when he comes in and finds nobody to take his letters . . ."

"You're not leaving, Miss Smart, are you?" asked Miss Ellis, rallyingly.

"Oh, I'm no good for taking his letters. Don't you see?" Miss Smart grimaced. "He sends me away to look up something that's in his pocket all the time."

Vera bit her lip to keep the tears back. Fools that they were! *This* was not her trouble. Jeer as they might about Mr. Harrow, she was invulnerable there. It was strange how little she had been moved by the mention of Mr. Harrow. He was nothing to her. There had been no such stab of pain—or fear—as she had felt in hearing of Anne. Still she clutched at composure, thankful that their attention should not be directly upon herself. How cruel she must be! How wicked! For her Mr. Harrow had been a mere convenience. Yes, a convenience. She had used him deliberately as a refuge, as an anodyne. Well, was that right? Was it not a further wickedness? Vera quivered at last at knowledge of another wrong committed. It was added to her account. But she was not really penitent. Mr. Harrow was a man. Men could look after themselves. Anne was different. Even Anne! Anne was yet a woman, to be wronged! Ah, but the worst of all was a wrong done to herself. It was Vera's self that suffered!

"I don't think Alfred likes me, somehow," proceeded

Miss Smart, with an air of tremendous enjoyment, as though the joke were good.

"Strange!" cried Miss Ellis, archly playing up as usual to Miss Smart.

"Perhaps he daren't show it!" Miss Smart spoke in a fantastically sentimental voice, and tittered. "Perhaps he's got a secret crush on me."

Vera looked askance at Miss Smart. Her glance held contempt. She hated Miss Smart for these endless feeble witticisms, which were so ill-timed and ill-aimed. Miss Smart would never forgive Mr. Harrow for not liking her. Having earned dislike, she repaid dislike with dislike, and made her own dislike a virtue. How could any one like her? Horrible woman!

"You don't encourage him," said Miss Ellis, continuing the sport.

"Oh, I must take some lessons!" sneered Miss Smart.

"*I* can't teach you!" cried Miss Ellis. "He's quite beyond me. He looks *through* me."

"Oh, I know where to look . . . Hee hee," laughed Miss Smart.

"You'll frighten him!" The thought made Miss Ellis giggle. "He'd be frightened out of his life. Wouldn't it be fun to make a fuss of him! He'd get so worried, he wouldn't know *where* to look. He'd be sure to think we meant it!"

They all laughed at the picture of Mr. Harrow alarmed for his own safety.

"Oh, my *dear,* we haven't a chance!" cried Miss Smart. "Didn't you know?"

Vera proceeded with her task as calmly as she was able to do.

And in the midst of the conversation Mr. Harrow came flying into the room. He was there all in a moment, with

his papers and his long face and his glance of dislike at Miss Smart. Vera could not check the faint warmth which came to her cheeks at his sudden appearance.

IV

In vain Mr. Harrow sought to engage her in whispered conversation. She was mercilessly cold. At his nearness, Vera drew away. Her repugnance increased with the passing of each instant. How had she thought it possible—even in her despair—that she might marry him? She had not thought it. Now she knew that she never could have married him. Mr. Harrow, carrying with him the atmosphere of stale tobacco, as though every pocket held an old strong pipe; carrying with him, too, that commonness in grain from which her soul revolted; how could she ever have suffered him to take her hand, to kiss her? The thought made her even colder. Distaste began to grow to a fever.

". . . aren't you going to look at me? . . ." she heard him say, as if in the course of some other remarks which had been inaudible. She could not bear to look at him. She shrank away from him with the most intense aversion. Gone now was any fear of Miss Smart's sarcasm; she could not think of it. Only she was filled with powerful desire that he would go away, and free her from this terrible state of active dislike.

Presently the monotonous voice stopped.

"You haven't got a word of it," said Mr. Harrow, quietly. "What's up?"

Vera started out of her strange lethargy.

"I beg your pardon," she said, coldly.

"What's up?"

"D'you mind dictating it again?"

"You're a bit cool, aren't you?" grumbled Mr. Harrow.

Now there was a different note in his voice. There was anger. Looking up, Vera saw him frowning; and as she looked she was seized with a shivering which made any reply unnecessary.

"You're ill," commented Mr. Harrow. "Look here, you'd better go home."

Vera was as cold as ice. Her hands were cold, and her cheeks. Her heart was cold. Within, she felt that every nerve was burning. A bitter smile played upon her lips.

"D'you mind dictating it again?" she repeated. "I didn't hear you."

Mr. Harrow caught up his papers in sudden fury, and strode out of the room. The door slammed behind him. Vera heard Miss Smart give a quite unpremeditated laugh, and stared across the room at Miss Smart, her eyes burning with cruelty. Before that gaze even Miss Smart's laughter died, and with a movement of her shoulders she turned to the sorting of some papers which lay upon her desk.

CHAPTER XXVII: A PICTURE

I

AND from this time Vera waited. Whenever one of the boys who answered the telephone came into the office with a message she thought it was for herself. When she left the building at lunch time and in the evening she gazed quickly about, expecting to see Mortimer waiting. She looked at home and upon her desk in the typists' room for a letter from him. During the walk to and from the omnibus in the morning and at night her heart was the whole time ready to leap at sight of him. She was waiting. What she awaited, Vera did not know. She knew only that she longed for Mortimer. She awoke each morning from a dream that she was in his arms.

Moods of shame and triumph, of fear and wanton eagerness chased each other through her mind. For half an hour together she would sit absorbed, only to find that she knew nothing of her own thoughts, that her cheeks were hot and her eyes wet. Mortimer! She longed for him so deeply that Mortimer was never really absent from her bewildered senses.

At last, three or four days later, when she was upon her way home, Vera met Mortimer. She had left her omnibus at the usual point, and was walking along the dull little roads with her eyes and ears unconsciously alert. Those who saw her would not have known that she was listening and watching, for she walked lightly and quickly, her head lowered, and a look of such sadness upon her face that for a time all trace of her piquant

prettiness was obscured. The paleness of her cheeks, and the melancholy turn of her lips, the despondent carriage of her body and the heaviness of her eyes, showed unhappiness, indeed, but not attention. In reality she was cowed by the sombre houses before which she passed, which seemed to have such severe eyes that they were like justice itself.

It was strange how she could not believe that she would not see him. From the moment of her alighting, when Vera had quickly glanced about her, as she always did now, she had longed for Mortimer's voice, and for the touch of his hand. Only in that touch, though it should excite her, would she find relief from the strain of her life. Was he there? Alas! Now he would be at hand: at this corner he would come into sight; or if not there, at the next . . . In vain! The corner revealed a road as blank as that which she had already traversed. Vera's heart sank; her steps grew slower, from weariness and despondency.

II

Ah! At last, at last! And yet, when she recognised Mortimer's quick, irregular step behind her, Vera's heart seemed for an instant to stop beating. All that frozen coldness which had enabled her to endure three dreadful days at the office—under the merciless observation of the girls and the frowning coolness of Mr. Harrow—fell suddenly away. She faltered, almost stumbling; her breath came fast. Radiance rose within her, not yet apparent to Mortimer as with flushed cheeks and averted eyes she suffered him, in the open street, to take her hands and hold them. Once only did her glance flutter across his face, like a caress.

Neither spoke in greeting. Then, almost harshly—

"You expected me?" Mortimer said.

She could not answer. The singular roughness of his voice, the confidence of his approach, held something which struck unpleasantly. Swiftly, love erased the impression. Sensitiveness was gone to all save delight in Mortimer's touch and look; his carriage and his manner. She was too happy. Mortimer was by her side, holding her hand, looking at her with love that almost equalled her own. It was enough. Adoringly, she dwelt upon the beautiful delicacy of his skin, upon that mysterious quality in him—that charm of personality—which for herself distinguished Mortimer from every other man in the world.

"I *hoped* you'd come," said Vera, at last, shyly.

"Before this?" Still he was abrupt.

"Yes; before this."

"I couldn't come last night. I couldn't leave . . . Anne."

There was something ominous now in the glance he gave her. At Anne's name Vera began immediately to feel faint. Slowly the colour crept from her cheeks, and presently returned and returned, so that she was deeply flushed.

"Is she ill?" whispered Vera.

"She's been ill. She's better."

"At home?"

"She went back to Kilburn's to-day. I want to speak to you about that." Mortimer began now to walk by her side, holding Vera's arm and suiting his longer stride to hers.

How cool he was! How unembarrassed! A shock went through her.

"To me?" Vera's head went up. She was mortified by the intimacy of his tone in reference to Anne. Was not Anne their common enemy? Oh, there was chill

and dread in happy love as well as in deprivation! How strange his tone.

"Yes," proceeded Mortimer. "It's all very queer."

"It seems so, indeed," whispered Vera. But so quietly that he did not hear her. Did Mortimer not love her? It had seemed that their love, declared, would never lose ecstasy. This tone . . . Anne . . . Shame awakened. She withdrew her arm from his hand. "What do you want to say about Anne?"

Mortimer, as if, observing that gesture, he had interpreted it as adverse to himself, looked very quickly at her, and away again. He, too, chilled. She saw his expression harden. It frightened her. Vera knew every movement that he made. Knew, and reacted to it. Now, he could hide nothing from her. Could she hide anything from him? Her breath caught. Her love could not be hidden. Even now, it made her lips quiver.

"I want you to come and see Anne," Mortimer said.

"Mortimer!" Vera had stopped suddenly in the street. She swayed under the blow.

"She's ill," was all Mortimer said in reply.

"But I—to see her! After . . ."

"Do you want to make her suspicious?"

Vera was stunned—by his indifference to her horror as well as by that horror itself.

"Oh, Mortimer!" Miserably, she added, "I should be ashamed."

At that, even he looked a little troubled.

"I know. I know," Mortimer agreed. "Well . . . What's to be done?"

They stopped quite still, and Vera sighed.

"Yes, what *is* to be done?" she murmured, both echoing his question and asking it again with a different meaning. "Mortimer, I'm afraid."

He shrugged. His hands in his pockets, and his head

inclined in thought, he took two or three steps. They were the only persons in the little road of small grey houses into which their steps had brought them. They were alone and unobserved. But neither would have been conscious of observation. Their own problems were too engrossing.

"It's no good being afraid," he said at last. *"I'm* afraid, too."

"You? Of what?"

"I can't tell you. I don't know." Impatiently, he exclaimed. "Oh, I'm tied; I'm tied. Only rich men can afford these things——"

"What things?" Vera's feeling mounted suddenly. These things! It was her turn to speak harshly. What did he mean? Was their love but an incident? The secret dread of her heart grew imperious. Ah, she was wronged! At once, her pride was tumultuous, drowning her love.

Mortimer, with his head still down, looked up at her. Sensitive, now, to every intonation, to every smallest hint, Vera felt the faintest sneer in that glance, as though he picked his words with an inferior.

"I mean, of course, love," he answered, drily enough.

"You're sneering," protested Vera, hotly. She with difficulty maintained self-control.

"Indeed, no. Unless at life." Mortimer's hands flew out of his pockets, and would again have taken Vera's. She, upon a contrary impulse, retreated a pace, drawing up as she did so. The blood was gone from her cheeks. She was in an instant weary, sobered of all the emotion she had felt, and dispirited.

"Because I love you," she said, unsteadily—oh, this hateful shivering of excitement that stifled her and made her voice quaver! Why could she not remain calm?—"you think nothing of me. You're cold and bitter."

"Cold?" demanded Mortimer, incredulously. "Good God! I, cold? It's ridiculous. When I'm in a fever! D'you think I *want* you to see Anne. D'you think . . . To risk——"

"Not only risk!" cried Vera, passionately.

"What then?" It was as if he masked as he spoke.

"You don't understand the humiliation." Her voice held tears. It was the voice of a shamed child.

"Do I not? In my own case? I say that if I had money this wouldn't be a difficulty. You and I could go——. The rest would be with Anne. Now, what can I do? I'm tied—not only to London, but to this district. It's the bank, don't you see? I could ask to be exchanged; but what good does that do?"

"I don't understand you."

"Yet it's simple enough. If I could, I should leave Anne. I should go to another part of England until she divorced me. I am not ignoring you. I'm thinking of you. I'm thinking of your happiness."

"You mean that I should go with you?"

"Eventually, yes."

Vera shivered still, but her passion died.

"I should lose Anne, and Mum . . ." she murmured, and miserably shook her head.

"That's the alternative." She saw Mortimer turn away, as if in anger. Instantly, Vera's courage failed. She took two or three steps after him, her hands outstretched.

"Mortimer. Don't leave me. I can't bear it."

They were together again, with clasped hands; but they were no nearer a conclusion.

III

Presently they walked a little way farther, and Mortimer came back to the subject of Anne.

"She wants to leave her office," he said, abruptly.

Vera, brooding still upon what he had said earlier, and with her nerves already unbearably excited, was checked. She echoed his speech, at first bewildered by it.

"Kilburn's? Oh, Mortimer! Why's that?"

He shrugged. To Vera's eyes he, also, looked tired and anxious.

"I don't know. She says she's uncomfortable. She didn't want to go to-day."

"Was that because she was ill?"

"Because of something that had happened."

"A quarrel? Did she tell you?"

"Nothing. She tells me nothing." Mortimer flung out a hand. "I don't even know for certain that *anything* has happened. But she throws it in my teeth that if we weren't married she'd leave them at once."

"Throws it . . . Why, Mortimer; you said——. You said that Anne *wanted* the marriage."

"She did." Mortimer's brows went up.

"That it was her doing."

"That—and that I was mad with loneliness . . . I've not defended myself, have I?"

Vera's mind took a sharp leap. Anne . . . loneliness . . . Was Mortimer . . . ? Of course what Mortimer said was true. Of course it was true. Of course . . . He loved her, and would not lie to her. But his cry had set fire to a train of thought. Anne had *wished* the marriage. Mortimer had been lonely. And then?

"Has she said anything about Mr. Sims?" demanded Vera.

"Mr. Sims? No."

"He's the cause, then. That's why she wants to leave. He's——" Vera did not finish her sentence. There was no need to do so.

"Sims!" Mortimer broke into humourless laughter. Then: "Surely you're wrong."

Vera shook her head at the cackle of laughter. It hurt her. It was false. It was a sneer at Anne.

"I think I'm right."

"But it's absurd!" cried Mortimer. "With Anne!"

Swiftly Vera thought again. Each moment she was more sure.

"I shall see Anne," she said. "I think I'm right. I'm sure I'm right." She was carried for that moment quite beyond concern with herself. She was thinking of Anne.

IV

They came, still speaking of this, to the road in which the Treachers lived; and then turned back again, to escape observation. Suddenly Vera uttered an exclamation and was silent. Then:

"Poor Anne!" she cried. "My poor Anne!"

A fresh picture started to life in her mind. It was of Anne alone. Anne uncomforted. She was painfully moved by the picture. It was too vivid to be ignored. For once, Vera imagined Anne as she ordinarily imagined only herself. She saw Anne married to a man who did not love her; working every day with a man who did love her, who had opportunities for making Anne unhappy, uncomfortable; Anne so loyal, so kind . . . Poor Anne! Alone! Alone in the whole world, and filled with perplexity such as Vera well knew. If Anne loved Mortimer? It was very well to brush that love aside. Mortimer did so. She could not. If Anne loved Mortimer—then pity poor Anne. And she herself, taking from Anne the love of Mortimer . . .

"Oh!" exclaimed Vera, in horror at her own rapid emotional conception. "I'm a *beast!* I'm a *beast!*"

She almost pushed Mortimer from her, beating her hands upon the air in wild distress.

"Vera!" he protested. "My sweet!"

"No!" She was steeled against him. It was vehement. "I *can't.*"

"You can't *what?*" Mortimer was close upon her, catching at her arm. He was as fierce as she, and as afraid of losing love. His action had been one of despair.

Vera, distractedly, aware of revelation, felt her heart breaking. "And *you,* poor dear!" she exclaimed. "You, too . . ."

Swiftly, she kissed him—not, as before, with excitement, but with compassion. She could not weep. She was exalted.

"I don't understand you," said Mortimer, in a stupid, baffled, boyish way.

Vera drew him close to herself. Never had she loved him so much. He was her boy, her own lover, so sweet and helpless; and she——ah, she was inspired now with thoughts of beauty; she had guessed at the unknown, unguessable marvels of Anne's heart.

"I don't understand myself. But I understand Anne a little better than you do," murmured Vera, in a broken voice of love and compassion. "I shall see her."

"To-night?"

"No; to-morrow."

"Shall I meet you?"

"No. I'll come alone . . ." To herself, bitterly murmuring, full still of her new intuition, Vera cried: "Too late. It's too late . . ." Terrible shame and sorrow began to overwhelm her. With a stifled sob, she ran from him. Too late! That was the burden of her thought. And again: "Too late . . . But I love him so!" Almost weeping, she reached home.

CHAPTER XXVIII: THE VISIT

I

ALL the next day Vera was excited by the new thoughts of Anne which had so astonishingly occurred to her. She almost forgot her own troubles in the consideration of Anne's. Almost, but not quite. She had arisen in the morning with a swimming headache, and had been forced for a few moments to sit down upon her bed, recovering from a faintness. But gradually she had felt better, and during the day she had lost her headache. It was not wholly gone, but it was at a distance.

When evening came, Vera hurried to her omnibus. She hid from Mr. Harrow, who had been trying all the week to waylay her, and thus escaped him. Breathlessly, she almost ran through the crowds, as she had seen others do. So she felt that she would never again condemn those who ran inconsiderately through crowds. Once she had awakened to the reasons for hurrying, she could see that perhaps others, besides herself, had reasons. But she did not only grasp an explanation: she gloried in the fact that she had grasped it. She became superb in her sympathy for all.

"Certainly, a change has come over me," thought Vera. "I'm interested in other people. I haven't been. Why is it? Is it because Mortimer loves me? How I wish I could ask Anne!"

And this made her think again of Anne, and of Mortimer; and when she thought of the two Vera suddenly

lost heart. From a little, childish, self-complacency, she sank to hopelessness.

II

At home, she changed her dress and had her supper; and at last started out to go to see Anne. And during her journey these jumbled feelings of dread and joy, of sympathy and—something that she could not name, which came ever into her thought of Anne—something that she would have disliked to hear called jealousy—alternated in her eager mind. Dread and shame; hopelessness . . . And a kind of rapture, because she was loved. Horror at something inexplicable in herself; and a longing that Mortimer's passion for her should never die.

So preoccupied was Vera that she almost passed the house for which she was bound. At the last moment, she stopped suddenly before it, and looked right up to the windows at the top of the house. It was a glance only; but it showed her Mortimer at one of the windows, leaning out, watching her coming. At the same instant, before Vera had time to push open the much twirled and twisted iron gate, the front door flew open, and Anne was framed in the doorway.

At the sight of Anne—for the first time since the night upon which she had betrayed Anne—Vera felt her throat contract. The ordeal was to be more terrible than she had realised. It was to be unbearable. She could not face Anne. Flurriedly, she darted up the steps, and was beside Anne, moving quickly in nervousness, quaking, prey to a thousand doubts and hesitations. The reality of Anne, the reality of her own wickedness, was so much more grave than it had seemed in her emotional pictures. These, at a touch, were shattered. They already had a

sickliness which horrified Vera. Anne was in a very light yellow frock—a new one, evidently; and was the more terrifyingly a stranger. Vera's impulsiveness died, and left her full of fear.

"I'm so glad you've come," said Anne, as affectionately as ever.

Without replying, Vera blindly crept up the stairs. She could not speak.

III

And upon the landing at the head of the stairs Mortimer took her hand, and pressed it, and for an instant held it close against his heart. The action, which gave Vera strength, warned her also of the part she must play. Instead of yielding now to her shame, she must be bold. Whatever her self-contempt, she must be bold. And yet, with Anne before her, Vera did not know how to be bold.

Mortimer moved restlessly about the big, high-ceilinged, dingy brown and purple room, and Anne made Vera sit down in the more comfortable of the two armchairs. It was that one which had its back to the evening light, and for this at least Vera was thankful. Confused and agitated, she stared round the ugly walls, at the pictures and photographs, at the many ornaments which Mrs. Earle's mistaken generosity had led the landlady to allot to her lodgers. They made her the more alarmed. Tears were behind her eyes, causing them to be dark and sightless. She could not keep still. There came upon her a renewal of that frantic desire to scream which she had felt earlier in the week when travelling to the office. She felt herself to be surrounded by ugliness, to be ugly in herself, and the cause of ugliness in others. Mortimer . . . Shudderingly, her eyes closed, she re-

called the scene in the wood. She was breathing rapidly; her heart was jumping. It was unbearable.

"You've been ill, Anne," said Vera, stumbling over the words. "What's been the matter?"

Anne put her off. She pretended that her illness had been nothing. The effect upon Vera was immediate. It was clear that Anne did not trust her. She did not trust her—she was immovable. She spoke quite lightly, as to a child. Then Anne was after all cold; for she could confide in nobody.

"A little chill," answered Anne. "It's gone."

Mortimer stood mockingly near the door, looking from one to the other of them. There was a glow in his eyes, a smouldering, when he regarded Vera; but to Anne he was malicious enough.

"Really gone?" demanded Vera. Still, in spite of her question, she could not meet Anne's glance which was raised so frankly.

"Very nearly. I've been at the office again to-day."

At this, as if it were a signal, Mortimer opened the door. Vera saw his face half-hidden by his nearer shoulder.

"You're going to have a talk," he said. "I'll go out for a little. Just an hour or so. I'll be back in good time to walk home with you, Vera."

It was impossible to answer. Vera saw Anne smile at Mortimer as he went. For herself, she was too embarrassed to turn her eyes in his direction. She was as one paralysed.

IV

The embarrassment did not diminish after Mortimer's departure. It increased. Vera looked down constantly, unable to bear the thought that Anne might read in her

eyes what lay so plain in her heart. And, as for Anne, even she was for a few moments indisposed to talk. Vera's brain felt as though it were going round and round, endlessly and unprofitably, as small shining beetles race wildly upon the surface of a pond. Now that she was here, she could not open the subjects upon which she had had such a number of thoughts. They faded from her attention. All she saw was Anne, whom she had wronged, whom she had betrayed, whom she was yet betraying. Vera had ado to restrain a gulping sob.

"But you, Vera, how are *you?*" At last Anne broke the silence. "Mum seemed to be worried about you."

"She said 'both of us,'" answered Vera, in a hoarse little voice.

"I've really been worried," said Anne, frankly. "The cold's been nothing."

"At the office?" asked Vera, almost in a whisper. Anne nodded.

"I think I really *must* leave. Mortimer doesn't want me to, of course; and I'd much rather get something else to do before leaving—ah, I might ask Mr. Twist! I hadn't thought of that!—I was going to say, that you need free time to *look* for a job."

"You'd get one, wouldn't you?" asked Vera.

Anne gave a slight shrug—a gesture she had caught from Mortimer.

"I don't think they much like married girls in offices," she made answer. "They have some odd ways. Mr. Sims never really liked my——"

"Is it Mr. Sims who's the trouble now?" questioned Vera.

"Yes," said Anne. "He's a trouble."

"Is he making love to you?"

Anne did not answer for a moment.

"He's being rather terrible," she said, at last. "You

know, he's been awfully good——. But I've got into a nervous state about him——"

"Perhaps you're in love with *him,*" said Vera. She waited breathlessly for Anne's reply. Her eyes suddenly bold and penetrating, she stared across at Anne, watching her. And saw the colour rising to Anne's cheeks, and saw Anne's eyes grow dark.

"No," said Anne, rather doggedly. "Not that. I don't think I could ever be in love with more than one person at a time."

Vera felt that she was fainting. What was the truth about Anne?

"You might be," she forced herself to say. Surely Anne must observe the quiver in her voice; the dying note upon which she spoke! She prayed that she might have escaped notice.

Anne smiled very slightly. Quickly Vera averted her head, as Anne seemed to look straight into her eyes. She was just in time.

"Somehow I don't see myself," Vera heard.

"It's not a thing you can help," she breathed.

"If you love one person with all your heart, I don't see how you can find room for another," answered Anne.

With all your heart! Vera's head jerked as her body became limp with despair.

"And is it so with you?" she whispered.

Anne did not speak. She looked up, disconcertingly, with such an expression upon her face of surprise at the question that no further answer was needed.

Vera sighed heavily. She could bear no more. Listlessly, her head rolled against the back of the chair. If only she could die!

Was it true? Was Anne playing with her? Clever Anne! Ah, but truthful Anne! Again a great dizziness

came upon Vera, and she held close to the arms of her chair until the dizziness was gone.

V

What passed between them during the remainder of the time she stayed Vera did not know. She spoke and listened in a dream. And suddenly, without waiting for Mortimer to return, she rose to go home.

"Don't go," said Anne. "Mortimer will be disappointed."

"No, he won't be disappointed . . ." Vera faltered.

"Vera. No, Vera, really . . ."

"I can't stay."

"Are you ill?"

"Tell him . . . tell him I couldn't stay."

She tore herself from Anne's soft embrace, and ran down the stairs and out into the darkness. She ran until she reached the end of the road, and stopped then only because she was too weak to run any farther.

"I won't see him again," she thought. "I'll never see him again. I'm wicked; but I'll stop being wicked. I can't go on seeing Anne. I'm too ashamed. I hate myself. I despise myself. How could I be so cruel? She loves him—ah, but I love him, too . . . I must go away, and never see Anne again. Never see *him*. It's best . . ." Sobbing, she exclaimed: "Judas! I can't go on . . . oh, I wish I could die. I wish I could die."

CHAPTER XXIX: DISASTER

I

IT was an evening some weeks later. Vera, slipping out of the house, went through a series of short roads until she came, among tall grey houses, to other, narrower, streets which were unfamiliar to her. It was almost dark, and she sped unseeing. Only when she reached one of these streets at a distance from home did she stop, and wait, as if for an expected companion.

Every now and then, although the evening was warm, Vera shuddered. It was to be noticed that she shrank whenever a passer-by glanced into her face. She shrank, and endeavoured to conceal her features. Down over her eyes the bell-like hat was deliberately pulled. A scarf about her neck hid her chin. She was dressed in a dark costume, so uncharacteristic that it made her almost unrecognisable.

Near where Vera waited in the shadow there was a brilliantly lighted grocer's shop. As she watched, she could see the faces of all who passed the shop illumined and made ghastly by that merciless light; but she herself was never seen, because those who came within its beams were dazzled by the light and were unable to penetrate the immediately succeeding gloom. Vera saw them go blinking by, and sometimes caught glimpses of the expressions they wore, of anxiety or pleasure or weariness.

But she did not think of the people she saw. She was bent only upon scrutinising each man who came within that blasting radiance, lest it should be he whom she

sought. And Mortimer was late. He had several times been late for their meetings, always with a reason; but to-night he was later than usual, and to-night of all nights patience with delay was impossible. Shivering yet, Vera raised her scarf a little higher. Her body was not still. She betrayed every moment the degree of her mental perturbation.

The minutes dragged on. Again and again she looked at her watch. It was nine o'clock. Nine o'clock; and Mortimer not yet by her side. Vera's shoulders drooped. Her bearing had changed as she waited. From impatience, it had sunk to lassitude. But the way in which she incessantly turned her head this way and that indicated that she was wearily overwrought. Truly, all the feverish suffering she had hitherto known was as nothing to that which she now felt.

II

The hour crept nearer. It was five minutes to nine. She could not restrain her sobbing impatience for Mortimer's coming. For an instant she stepped out into that pool of light, only to be blinded by it in her endeavour to read the distance. Then back into the shadow, murmuring, and quickly drawing her breath.

And as the clock struck nine Mortimer came. He was beside her; his hand gripped her arm. His cheek was roughly against hers, and his seeking lips were hard and passionate upon her mouth. Speechlessly, she clung to him. Quickly, the two were drawn into the darkness, and hidden from the world. So they hastened in the dark streets, until the sound of traffic was dulled. Then only did they stay, and kiss long, as if they had no desire but this only, to be within each other's arms.

"My sweet," whispered Mortimer. "My beautiful."

"Dear."

"I couldn't come earlier. I had to stay and stay. Were you weary of waiting?"

"I was frightened. I *am* frightened," Vera whispered back. She pressed herself more closely to him, and Mortimer's arms were about her even more tensely, until she felt that they must bruise her tender flesh.

"Frightened, now? Why, my dearest; now that I'm here." Gently, he reproved her.

"Still frightened. I've been waiting so long. I've seen so many unhappy people . . . Dear, I'm very frightened." Still she clung to him, and her soft cheek was against his. She kissed him with fear in her eyes, clinging . . .

"Not now," he begged. "I've got such a lot to tell you."

"You, too?" murmured Vera.

"Tell me now," Mortimer said. "Why are you so frightened?"

Vera felt warmth rise brusquely to her cheeks.

"Mortimer," she whispered. "I've been afraid now for weeks. I've hidden it. I've refused to think it could be true. But it *is* true. And, oh, my dear, I don't think I can bear it."

In his arms, she began to cry; and the tears were a relief to her, and Mortimer's presence was a relief to her, so that gradually she ceased to endure that terrible fear, but cast a little of it away.

"D'you mean," exclaimed Mortimer. "D'you mean you're——"

"I'm going to have a baby," said Vera.

And at that she fairly broke down; and sobs shook her whole body.

III

For a long time they could not say anything. She could feel Mortimer's arms and his kisses; and presently he began to wipe away her tears, and the sobs grew less vehement, until they were no longer beyond control.

"Are you sure?" he asked, at last.

"Too sure," she answered, wretchedly.

"Good God! How awful!" The truth had dawned upon Mortimer. She felt his arms leave her; she was pressed away from him in the darkness. He took a step or two, his agitation greater than her own. "Good *God!* It's awful!"

"What can be done?" Vera asked.

"You're sure? Of course you are. Well, this is the worst. Oh, my God!" Mortimer could not keep still. He walked about near her, while Vera leant against the blank wall of a garden. His horror reawakened her own. She saw again in Mortimer's agitation the dreadfulness of their situation. Panting, she awaited his return to her. It was long in coming. "Well, I don't know what to do!" he ejaculated at last. "I'm beaten. No wonder you're frightened. Poor child!"

She heard him give a bitter laugh, and knew what was the thought in his mind.

"No, Mortimer," she pleaded.

"But it *is* my fault!" cried Mortimer. "All of it. All of it. *What* a mess I've made. Anne doesn't matter; but *you* . . . Anne's ill, you know. The doctor says nerves."

"He might say that of me," said Vera.

"O-oh!" She had not intended the interpretation he put. Her remark had been innocent. "Vera, for God's sake!"

Vera almost screamed at the new horror his exclamation evoked.

"No, no!" she cried. "No; never that! I didn't . . ."

"It's not so," he swore. "It's not so . . ."

"It couldn't be."

Thus they comforted each other; and came again together in the darkness. Vera felt him shaking from head to foot, and his cheek cold with fear.

"I'm certain of this," Mortimer told her, in a thick voice. "D'you see? I'm certain of it. Anne's ill; but not . . ."

"I believe you," Vera whispered. "Dearest, you *must* believe that I believe you."

"Yes . . ." murmured Mortimer, drawing the word reflectively to great length. "Yes . . ." He was considering. "Something has to be done now. We can't go on any longer. Oh, my dearest, we'll have to face the thing now."

"I shall lose Anne," Vera moaned. "Oh, Mortimer!"

"We must do something. We must go. Let me think. How long have we got? No; the sooner the better. I'll . . . I'll find a way." He was sunk into thought. The shaking of his body was gone. Again he had released her, and now held her hands only. "I'll find a way."

"But *what* way?" cried Vera, distraught. "I've tried to think."

"I don't know. I'll find it. I'm *glad* of this, Vera." He was speaking impetuously. "I hate the furtiveness. It's humiliating. It's an injury to you——"

"An injury the more to Anne," whispered Vera, urgently.

Mortimer dropped her hands.

"Oh, *Anne!*" he said, with loathing. "I've told you I hate her."

Sighing, Vera shook her head in the darkness. She pictured Anne, bereft. Then, roughly surging within her, came that passionate need of Mortimer for herself.

"What cowards we are," she exclaimed. "And how cruel!"

Mortimer did not answer. His face was averted. She caught upon it the faint reflected gleam of a distant street light. Otherwise all about them was black. Even the sky above was obscured, so that they were completely in darkness, groping their way in the world as they were groping their way in life. Again Vera shivered, and again. She had been unhappy before, but she was more unhappy now. Before there had been lights and shadows. Now all was dark. For this, as she knew, was disaster.

CHAPTER XXX: ANNE

I

AN evening later Vera shrinkingly went to see Anne. The room was darkened. Impossible to see clearly in such a half-light. Thankfully, Vera found herself protected by that very measure which had been devised for the protection of Anne. Her heart beating, she crept inside the door, and stood there, afraid to go forward. Dimly, she could see the outline of Anne's bed, and the window. What else was in the room she did not know. All was obscure. And that terrible silent figure in Anne's bed . . . Instinctively Vera pressed back against the door.

There came a whisper.

"Who's there?"

"Vera . . ." She heard a long sigh. Swiftly, she went forward to the bedside, kneeling, taking Anne's hand. "My dear, what is it that makes you ill?" she murmured. "I didn't know you were ill . . ."

The hand which had rested upon the coverlet, the hand which she had taken in her own two hands, slipped away, and was drawn within the bed, out of sight.

"I'm not ill," said Anne, in a strange voice which held no expression at all. "I'm only tired. Just tired . . . That's what's the matter with me."

"Mum's been here?"

"She's been very good."

Anne's head was turned away. She seemed to gaze out of the room, away from Vera. And Vera felt her heart sink at that listless gesture. She leant her elbows

upon the bed, straining her eyes to see Anne's face; but as though her eyes were weak a mist rose before them, concealing Anne's face and everything about her.

"She's coming again."

"It's kind."

"To stay, if the doctor thinks she should."

"Oh, no." With a kind of exhausted courtesy, Anne answered. "Oh, no, I don't want her to stay. Poor Mum."

"Shall *I* stay?" Vera forced herself to make the suggestion. She hesitated an instant over it, longing for refusal; yet at length sincerely affectionate.

"You?" Anne slightly raised her head from the pillow, and suffered it to fall back again, as if she had not the strength to sustain it. "No."

II

"There's nothing the matter with me," resumed Anne, presently, as if to make some talk between them. She spoke in a low thick, lethargic voice, as one who was drugged might have spoken. "But I've somehow tired myself out. I got up to-day—was it to-day, or some other day? I forget. I got up, and found I had to sit quite still . . . as though a heavy weight was on my head. Not a headache—I don't mean that my head was aching. It was as if I had a weight there. And no energy at all. It was so strange . . ."

"Anne, dear . . ." Vera's head was bowed at this strange colourless tone from Anne, at this faint, colourless narrative of exhaustion.

"I shall be up again to-morrow," continued Anne. "At least to sit by the—not the fire, of course, because we shan't have one . . . To sit by the window, then, and look out at the people in the street. Perhaps I shall be

able to read a little. At any rate I shall be quite well again . . . well enough to go to the office . . ." She stopped, shuddering. "At least, whether I shall go to the office again I don't quite know. Poor Mr. Sims . . . My head aches, rather. Vera, I think if you don't mind you'd better go now. I find talking is rather a tax on me. It brings back so many things that I don't want to think about . . ."

"Let *me* talk," pleaded Vera. "Let me tell you . . ."

"Why," said Anne, in the same thick, dreary voice that she had used hitherto. "Why, what can you tell me . . ."—her head moved slightly upon the pillow—"what can you tell me . . . that I don't already know?"

III

Vera could not speak. She was like a bird caught in a room, frightened almost to insensibility, fluttering and fainting. If only Mum would come, and release her! If only Mum were there already! Mum would know what to do. Mum——

At last she was better. She must continue to talk, as though Anne's question had never been asked. She knew that she must disguise her thoughts, must seem to speak candidly, or Anne would not attend to what she was saying. Anne had never been easy to deceive. Was she the less so now? Almost desperately, Vera began—

"I thought if I talked a little," she said. "You've been here, busy with your own thoughts . . ."

Anne seemed to listen.

"I have indeed," she said, very quietly.

"Though, really," continued Vera, her heart failing, "I don't know what I could tell you that's amusing——"

"Oh, amusing," said Anne. There was a pause.

"At the office——"

"Ah, how is Mr. Harrow? You know we're always interested in him." The sleepy voice, so controlled and without warmth, seemed to hold a dryness. "Mortimer and I." Vera shrank at the mention of Mr. Harrow. For the first time, she dreaded to think of her use of him.

"I've been avoiding Mr. Harrow," she said, uncertainly. "He's been . . . been away for the last fortnight, having his summer holidays. He'll be back next week."

"Are you looking forward to that?" asked Anne.

"No," whispered Vera.

"Poor Mr. Sims," murmured Anne.

Was her mind wandering? They had spoken of Mr. Harrow, and not of Mr. Sims.

"You mean—Mr. Harrow?" suggested Vera. "You said 'Mr. Sims.'"

"Yes. I meant Mr. Sims. I think I'm sorrier for Mr. Sims than Mr. Harrow," said Anne, slowly. "And yet Mr. Harrow's . . ." Her voice died.

Vera rose slightly from her knees. She had an instant's fear that Anne had fainted.

IV

But Anne had not fainted. In a moment she went on talking.

"I wonder if Mum is here yet," she said.

"Shall I look?" Vera rose from the floor with relief. She stood bending over Anne, with her head lowered to catch the words uttered in that drowsy voice, which seemed to hold nothing but the sound of Anne's thick weariness.

"Would you? I should like to see her when she comes. And you'd better talk . . . talk to Mortimer. Mor-

timer . . . You'll find him in the next room, waiting . . ."

A faint smile was upon Anne's lips as she spoke. Her head rolled over, so that she was looking straight up towards the ceiling.

"Mortimer? Why . . ." The words were faltered. Vera quailed at the sound of Mortimer's name from Anne. She stood for a moment upright. Then stooped to kiss Anne.

It was when she had done so that Vera saw Anne's eyes. Seeing them, she started erect again, her hand sharply to her mouth, hiding it, pressing hard against it. For in spite of the dimness of the room it seemed to her that Anne's eyes held an expression of such burning contempt that she nearly cried aloud in horror.

PART SIX: ANNE

CHAPTER XXXI: MUM

I

ANNE opened her eyes. She was alone in the room. From where she lay she could see the curiously ugly ironwork of her little bedstead quite contorted in the half-light. It wavered ridiculously, so that she was amused. She had never seen anything more fantastic than the wavering of that solemn ironwork. Beyond the bedstead was the shadowy face of everything else in the room, which to her eyes, so used to this peculiar light, was comparatively clear. And when, once more, she looked at the bedstead, she found that the ironwork was perfectly still.

"I suppose there's some sort of fever still in my head," thought Anne. "Or did it really waver? It seems silly to wonder whether it wavered or not; and yet . . . Oh!"

She had remembered.

An hour later Anne was roused by the cracking of the heavily varnished door; and she looked up to see Mum coming into the bedroom. Mum as quiet and as trim as if she had been at home on a Saturday afternoon with Dad. Mum came quietly over and sat upon the edge of Mortimer's unoccupied bed. She peered at Anne through her spectacles, and when Anne stretched out a loving hand Mum took the hand and gazed dully upon it for a minute.

"How d'you feel now?" asked Mum.

"Quite well."

"Hm," said Mum. It did not sound very convinced.

"What are *you* doing here?" demanded Anne.

"I'm looking after you," replied Mum, with a kind of determination. "You're not fit to look after yourself."

Anne though for a moment.

"Why, what's the matter with me?" she cried.

"That's what we all want to know. Mortimer, the doctor, and myself," said Mum. "You've been feverish; you've been delirious——"

"Delirious!" exclaimed Anne. "What have I said?"

"Oh, it's all right," Mum assured her. "We couldn't understand a word of it. You haven't given yourself away. You've been crying, too."

"Good gracious me!" said Anne. "What about?"

"That I can't tell you. And now, when I ask you how you feel, you tell me 'quite well,' as if you were as cheeky as usual."

"*Am* I cheeky?" pondered Anne. "I sometimes don't feel at all cheeky. D'you think I've any reason to be?"

"No, I don't," briefly responded Mum. "I don't mind telling you."

II

She was like a wisp, sitting there upon the edge of Mortimer's bed.

"Mum; you're ever so small," said Anne. "And Dad's so big."

"Yes," Mum answered. "It sometimes happens so."

"I wonder why. D'you think it matters?"

"Some like it that way," replied Mum. "It's just as it takes them. It's not size that matters, but character. It's if you don't get on each other's nerves."

"Oh," said Anne. "Is that what character is? I've

often wondered what makes marriages happy." She hesitated. "Or unhappy."

"Sometimes it's the man," suggested Mum.

"No. It couldn't be the man only." Anne was sure of that. She was looking at Mum very steadily; and Mum was looking back at her.

"I don't say, always," retorted Mum. She slipped off the edge of the bed, standing nearer to Anne. "If you're so well, you'd better get up. I'll bring you some hot water."

"Mum," called Anne, as Mum turned away. And then found that she could not say what she had been going to say. "I've forgotten——"

"Hm," said Mum, and continued her way to the door. "Perhaps you'd better stay in bed till the doctor comes," she added. "You'll be better in the dark."

"I couldn't bear it!" cried Anne. For the first time her voice revealed the laceration of her heart. "Bring the water. I shall be better up. As for the light, a little more will do me good."

"Ah," said Mum, and went out, closing the door behind her.

III

Left to herself, Anne was sober enough. She was still rather weak, from lying in bed for several days; and it took her some time to dress. Even when she was dressed, she was more ready to sit down upon the bed than to walk out of this room into the next.

"I'm tired out," she said to herself. "That's what's really the matter." And then: "I wonder why I lie to myself. My heart's broken; and I pretend I'm tired. How silly of me. And Mum knows all the time what's the matter. I wonder how much she really knows. And I pretend to Mum, when all the time we both know . . .

I suppose the doctor calls what I've had a nervous breakdown. It's a name for it; and that's what doctors love to have. But I—what am *I* to do? She turned her face into the pillow, and a long, terrible sob shook her body. Anne was very silent for a long time.

Mum presently came back into the bedroom, making a good deal of noise, and almost trotting; so that Anne saw that Mum was afraid. The fact was revealed by her stubborn air of cheerfulness. Nothing would have allowed Mum to show fear; for she had never shown fear. She had never shown more of her thoughts than she could help, and fear was the most secret thought of all.

"Oh, you've managed," said Mum, in a false, brisk voice. "All right, are you?"

"Just tired," Anne answered. "Let's go into the next room."

They went together; and Anne, seeing that sitting-room, with its ugly, clumsy wall-paper and the well-intentioned pictures, felt a sob rise to her throat. Mum's arm was about her.

"It's nothing," stumbled Anne. "This is such an ugly room. Yet I've been very—I suppose very happy in it."

"That's as may be," said Mum. "I wouldn't say as you'd been very happy. You haven't *looked* so particular happy. But then nowadays you don't know *who's* happy. They all look alike to me—washed out little things. And you and Vera getting just as bad."

"Yes, of course . . . Vera," murmured Anne, half to herself. And shook her head slightly.

IV

They were alone in the room—Anne and Mum—and Mum had drawn one of the armchairs to the open

window, so that Anne could sit there and look down into the empty street. But first of all Mum brought a large cardboard box, and set it down beside Anne.

"For you," said Mum. "Come this morning."

Listlessly, Anne removed the lid of the box. Within, amid tissue paper, was a large bunch of crimson roses, so fine, and so beautifully scented, that their colour and perfume at once filled the room. But Anne knew immediately by whom the roses had been given, and pushed the box away from her.

"I don't want them," she said, in a dull way.

"But they're beautiful, dear," cried Mum. "Look what lovely large flowers they are. Smell how sweet they are!"

"I don't want them," repeated Anne.

"Why, there's a letter here . . ." Mum had taken the box and had carried it to the table with quick little steps. She now held up a large envelope. She lifted it to the light, and peered through the envelope. "Oh, it's only a card." She offered the envelope to Anne, whose hand dropped immediately to her side. "Aren't you going to open it?"

"The flowers are from Mr. Sims," explained Anne.

That was unexpected, at least. She saw Mum's eyes blink with astonishment.

"What! Is *he* sending you flowers?" demanded Mum. "Well! Isn't that kind! I never thought he'd do that. I wondered at him not writing. I wonder if he's the gentleman that called."

"Called?" Anne started. "Yes, very likely," she agreed. Mechanically, she tore the envelope and extracted the visiting card. Upon the back of it was a message in familiar handwriting.

"Thoroughly ashamed of myself," it read. "Please forgive and forget. I can't do without you.—E. S."

A faint smile dawned upon Anne's face as she read these words. As if Mr. Sims and his love for herself could matter in all this perplexity! As if they could ever matter!

"What does he say?" asked Mum, who had watched.

Anne looked up.

"Oh, he thinks he's responsible for my illness," she said. "He's very penitent."

"Oh, overwork," said Mum, approvingly. "I'm glad he realises it."

"No. Not overwork, Mum," answered Anne.

"No. I know it's not overwork," observed Mum, quickly. "And so do you."

"It might be."

"But it's not. It's Mortimer and Vera," said Mum. "That's what it is."

V

"Of course that's true," wearily assented Anne, after a moment. "The question is, what am I to do?"

Mum's face grew scarlet.

"I shall have a few words to say to Mortimer myself," she exclaimed. "For anything so selfish I never heard." She moved closer to Anne, her hands clenched. Anne saw how dark those hands were; how dark and old they were, as though Mum had worked and worked all her life, unresting and indefatigable.

"What's the good of saying words, Mum?" asked Anne. "What good does it do?"

"It relieves your feelings."

"Nothing would do that."

"My dearie . . ." Mum was mother once more; and her arms were about Anne's neck. Anne, choking, kept herself from crying. Mum's caress was unbearable.

"No, Mum; please don't talk to Mortimer. I must speak to him myself. And to Vera. I must see Vera before I see him. It's important. Mum, could I come home now, and wait until Vera comes, and then speak to her? I want to. We've got to do what's best."

"Best!" Mum gave a vehement exclamation. Anne, looking up, saw that Mum was crying.

"Mum, dear!" she begged, almost weeping herself. "Don't cry. I can't bear it."

"It would be best . . . I'm not crying, dear."

"You are!'

Mum wiped her eyes.

"When I think of you . . . Anne—they don't deserve it, either of them. Wretches! Selfish wretches! O-oh!" She moaned, overcome, and sank into a chair, the tears streaming afresh down her old cheeks. "If you could only *do* something!"

"Mum, dear. Don't you see you're making me cry, too? We must do what's best for everybody. If they love each other——"

"Love!" cried Mum. "Is *that* love! The cats do better!"

"It's the kind of love they both want." Anne could be as bitter as Mum.

"But you *can't* do it! It's not moral!"

"Is the other thing more moral?" asked Anne, drearily. "Oh, no, Mum; I think we'll——"

"You shan't, Anne! The beast!"

"I must do what's best," pleaded Anne. "I'll talk to Vera."

"Vera—ph!"

"They're both unhappy, remember."

Mum shook her head.

"They're not," she said, vigorously. "They're happy . . . Oh, they're happy enough now."

Anne caught warning from Mum's voice, from Mum's fierce and malignant glance.

"What d'you *mean?*" she demanded, starting from her seat.

"Yes!" cried Mum, her eyes on fire. "I *do* mean."

A chill as of death passed through Anne. She stared at Mum. Slowly she groped her way back to the chair, seating herself heavily in it. Her face was ashen.

CHAPTER XXXII: VERA

I

ANNE was back in her old home. The weeks had fallen away, and it was as if she had never been absent. The walls had sprung up around her. They crushed her. As she smelt the old familiar smell of soap and cooking from which the house never would be free, her breath caught and her heart sank. She dreaded more than anything in the world a living death within this cabined space.

And yet the house was a home for such a fugitive as herself from despair. She was safe here from cruelty. Here, nothing could harm her. Love, which was her need, would never fail. Anne, stupefied by calamity, touched the encompassing walls of the kitchen, as if she believed that they might cease upon entreaty to menace her. In vain. She was hemmed in for ever.

"It's over," she thought. "It's over. Everything finished. I shall never any more feel happy or alive. I shall go on living here until I die, knowing that Vera is with Mortimer . . ."

For a moment Anne lost composure.

"It's *too* hard. It's . . ." She pressed her fingers hard against her lips. "I shall be longing for him. Longing even for the faults—until I'm exhausted. What *were* they, to a lover? I shall long to heal and comfort him when he's in pain. Oh, Mortimer!"—Anne's lips were twisted in agony. Fiercely, as if confronting accusers, she cried: "What's my fault? What's my fault? Of

loving him too well? How could anybody say that? Of loving him too little?

"That's what they would say. Too little! When everything I had was his—my life, my heart . . . Too little! And now, what does Vera give him? What has she to give him? A loving heart, yes; but one to break, as mine breaks. Is he insatiable? Oh, my God, how can I bear this terrible pain? If life's so wretched, why do I go on living? Couldn't I, as other girls have done, find some way of killing myself? Life's no good to such as I—or such as Mortimer . . ."

With an effort, she controlled herself. Whatever had happened, though this should indeed be the end, she must not pity herself. She would plead with Vera—with Mortimer! With them both she would plead. It was useless. Pleading would avail nothing.

"They'd shrink from me. If I were to plead, they'd hide. Oh, God, how cold selfish people are! How implacable. And I—aren't I selfish? It's for myself I should plead. And I can't plead. I don't know how to plead. I endure. Ah, yes; but that's what I'm suffering for!" thought Anne, passionately. "Those who pity themselves indulge themselves. They earn pity from others. They live on the strength of others. I *can't.* Pity me . . .

"Who *would* pity me? Nobody! The practical ones would think me well rid of a man who didn't love me. The others—they'd willingly see me punished for foolish weakness and self-deception. How much pity do such as I get from the world? None! And love?"

At that, something stung Anne's pride. She ceased to lament. Instead, she passed her hand wearily across her forehead, and sat quite silent.

II

Later, going upstairs to the bedroom which she and Vera had shared for so many years, she saw its plainness and the home-painted beds through a mist of tears. And at last, as she turned and looked around the room, she caught sight of a letter which lay upon the dressing table. At its inscription—the envelope bore the one word "Anne"—she felt a tearing pain at her heart, and knew everything. The letter was Vera's.

> "Dear Anne.—We are gone. I should be too ashamed to see you again. I'm going to have a baby—of course you knew, you guessed. I saw how you looked. We love each other. It is more than we can bear. I expect it has been a shock to you, because—oh, well, you'll get used to it. Don't think I'm elated. I'm frightened, but I'm clutching at happiness. Somehow it *must* be beyond all this. You won't understand, of course. You're superior to both of us, and stronger. You are too cold to feel love such as ours. I know it is all horrible, but it is less horrible than if we stayed, deceiving you——"

There was no signature. The writing was hasty and uneven. At the foot of the page, as if the word had been scrawled wildly, Anne read "Forgive."

Ill as she had been, Anne had not, for once, the strength to endure this new trial. Everything about her became grey, as if the room had been suddenly darkened. She groped her way to one of the beds, and fell upon it. She had fainted.

III

Long afterwards, feeling desperately sick, Anne found herself lying in bed. Mum was not to be seen. She would return presently. And so Anne, lying there and knowing with certainty that her love was dishonoured and all her hopes were turned to water, was left to moan her grief in solitude. One moan of realisation she did give; but no more. For the rest she was silent. There was indignation and there was shame, too, in Anne's memory. Mortimer had forced her into the marriage by imperiousness, but still more by appeal to her love. She was bewildered at that, although she understood more clearly than she had done the occasion of his fits of petulance and irritability. Poor Mortimer! Poor distracted Mortimer, who had lightly dishonoured both Vera and herself in his frenzied pursuit of happiness . . . He had loved Vera all the time. Herself he had merely ruined as an alternative. . . . But farther back in Anne's memory was a happiness which she could never forget; and she clung to that memory with tenacity that would not yield. She *could* not but believe that Mortimer, at one time, for some reason, for some strange quality in herself which he had needed, had loved her. He had seemed to love her—to need her. Was this but a delusion the more? A further unhappiness? Had he loved her? Had he tired quickly, or found her wanting in the quality he sought? Had his love in fact been all the time given to Vera; or had he loved them both? Oh, there was no end to these terrible questionings which would torment her to death . . .

Cold, was she? Stronger . . . Superior . . . What taunts were these! Did Vera indeed mean them? Was she in reality cold? Cold—but to feel more deeply! Less demonstrative than Vera, less at the mercy of—yes, of

emotionalism—but *cold* . . . The charge was a shock to Anne. "How cruel of Vera to taunt me!" she thought. "When the victory's hers. The victory—is it indeed a victory? No, no, no. The victor doesn't taunt. She's unhappy. It's no victory; but a defeat. What must she *feel*. Shame only; shame and uncertainty . . . At least I needn't feel such shame . . . Ought I to?

"What do people do who have lost everything in life?"

Brooding, Anne shuddered at the charge of coldness.

"As if either of them could feel as I feel!" she exclaimed. "They couldn't. It's not in them! But to taunt me! Isn't it enough to be so cruel?"

Her mood changed.

"Poor things," she thought. "What's to happen to them? This love of theirs is love that tires. A year—two years . . . And then . . . What are they going to do? Both children . . . He might want to come back . . . I couldn't. And Vera will grow tired. They'll never stay together. There can't be any peace for either of them. They'll consume each other; and then bore each other. They'll—oh, but that's unthinkable. How hateful I am! I'm venomous. Am I imagining it all meanly, seeing it selfishly, *hoping* that they'll suffer? Indeed, I'm cold . . .

"And I? What is to happen to me? I can go on working, as in any case I should have to do. Nobody will know anything about me. And after a time the pain will be less, and I shall be a little happy; and then more happy . . . This will have been an escape from thraldom . . ."

Anne shook her head. She might glimpse the truth; but she could not believe it. She might peep into the future; but the present was too crushing to allow her to do more than peep. She could not yet picture the joys which lay ahead, the sufferings that were still to be en-

dured. It was one thing to conceive the fact that these dark weeks were but an episode in her life; it was another to console herself with a certainty. Her thoughts could go no farther than the next day and the next, and perhaps, darting irresponsibility, to days here and there in the distance.

At length she supposed herself to be going back to Kilburn's. She saw herself starting out from home in the morning, and catching the big red grinding omnibus to the West End. And walking from the bus to Kilburn's offices, and so up the creaking, dark stairs to Mr. Sims's room. She heard the noise made by the cover of her typewriter, and saw the purple inkstains upon the gloves she wore while cleaning the machine. For a time she would be busy; and then she would put away her brushes and the gloves, and sit at her desk, seeing through the window, as of old, the grimy foliage of that tree which grew up from the bare earth of the garden below. And then the handle of the door would be sternly seized, and Mr. Sims, in his smart lounge suit, with chamois leather gloves and a bowler hat in his hand, would enter the room, and march straight to his desk, full of busy self-importance and self-complacency.

"Morning," Mr. Sims would say, as if with noble condescension to one of an inferior order.

And so it would be, for morning after morning, until she left Kilburn's and went to work in some other office; and nobody would know the pain that she had borne, but all would suppose her to be cold and proud and immovable, like a haughty solemnity of the capitalist class. And all the time Anne's heart would be broken, because so far from being cold and proud and immovable she had the rare and incalculable power to love others more than she loved herself. That alone was her fault. That was the cause of her disaster.

Would it always be so? Would she be always unhappy?

Anne's head shook—at first vaguely and irresolutely; but, in the end with more conviction.

"No!" she said, aloud. "I'm not afraid."

In the excitement which the words awoke in her mind she sat up in bed, as if suddenly alert with new strength.

THE END